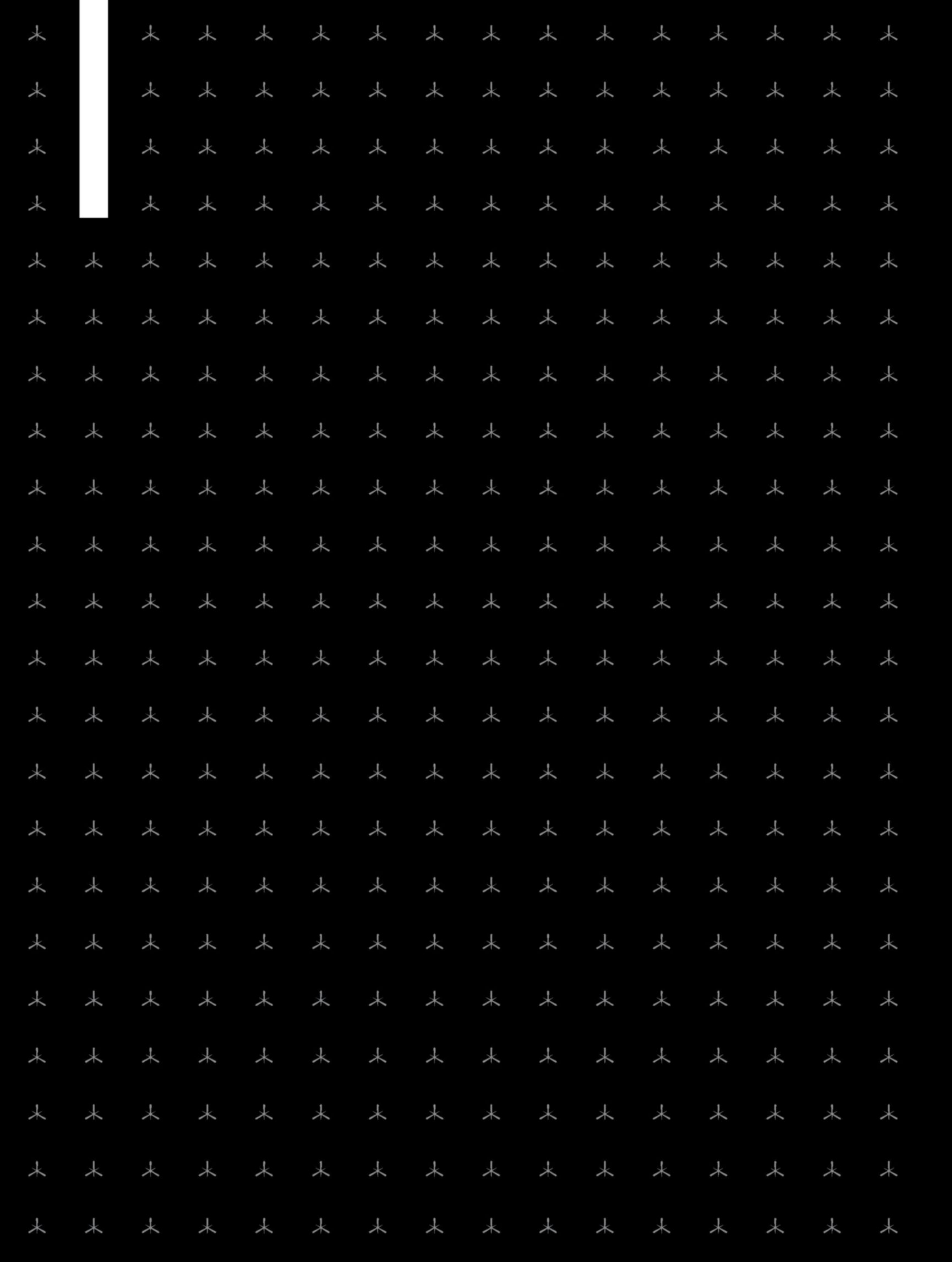
# EDGE®

THE FUTURE OF INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT

# CALL OF DUTY WWII

**WORLD EXCLUSIVE**
HOW THE BIGGEST SHOOTER ON THE PLANET IS GOING BACK TO ITS ROOTS

#307
JULY 2017



# The future of the future will still contain the past

Most games start as a blank canvas. It's something the founders of Sledgehammer Games have grown accustomed to, whether it was in the making of *Advanced Warfare*, its first game at the *Call Of Duty* helm, or the creation of *Dead Space*, when the duo were at Visceral Games. What game shall we make? In which year is it set? Who are the good guys and baddies? Weeks turn into months as you decide what guns should look like, what to call them, how they fire, and design funky reload animations for them. Slowly but surely, a picture begins to form.

Yet by winding back the clock to World War II, Sledgehammer found itself presented with a canvas that was already filled to bursting with battles, characters, stories and weaponry. That, you'd be forgiven for thinking, would knock an easy six months off the development time.

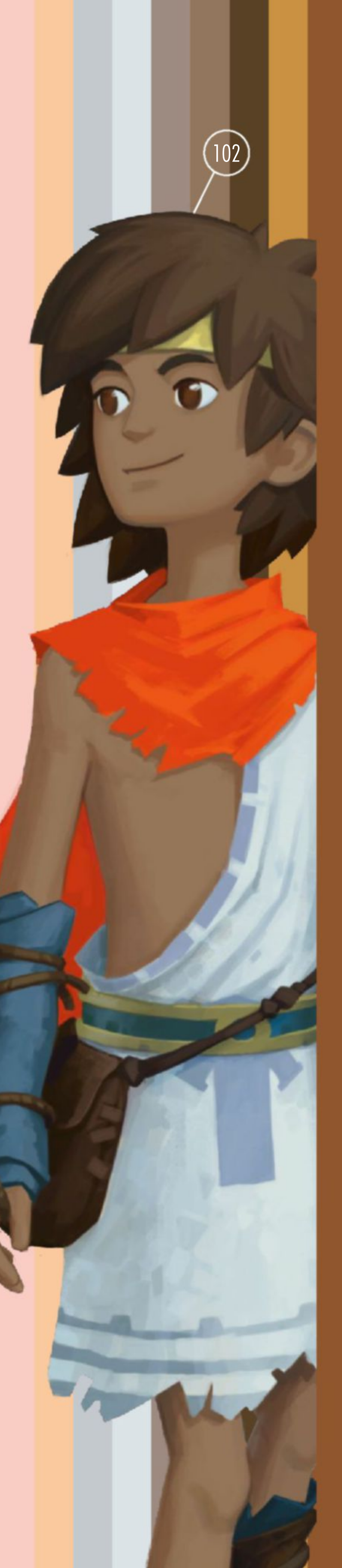
Not a bit of it. Sledgehammer spent the time it would have devoted to coming up with a setting to learning about the real-world one it had settled on. The studio heads toured Europe with a WWII historian. Back in California, development teams obsessed over the finer details to craft a game that was authentic and respectful to the source material. In the process, they learned not just about WWII history, but of their own connections to it. When one of the studio heads was helping design the limb-lopping Plasma Cutter in *Dead Space*, we doubt he thought of his grandfather, who lost a leg to a war wound. Here, however, such thoughts are unavoidable. The result, as Sledgehammer tells it at least, is a game that is not only steeped in its subject, but humbly respectful of it, too.

It's tempting to sneer at *Call Of Duty*, one of the biggest games on the planet. But this was too fascinating a story not to tell: of developers, famous as futurists, using cutting-edge tech to teach a history lesson; of a factual research trip that turned into an emotional journey none of them expected; and of a series which, after years of travelling steadily further into the future, is now heading back to the past. Our story begins on p60.



# games




## Hype



## Play





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#307

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JULY 2017

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# Rapper's delight

How the devs behind Parappa and Ouendan are teaming up for an audacious encore


天下泰平
HOTEL
SALE



**A SAITO BEHOLD**
**Yano and Matsuura might be spearheading the project, but Saito's presence should excite fans of iNiS's *Osu! Tatakae! Ouendan* in particular. Saito and his team originally conceived *Ouendan* as an arcade game, but when Nintendo released DS, iNiS decided the game should take advantage of its touchscreen interface. "The *Ouendan*/*Elite Beat Agent* series has a very special place in my heart, since I was involved with it from concept through the entire production," Saito says. "It was also the first title for me that had been received so positively by fans." His artistic influences for Project Rap Rabbit include a series of ancient Japanese picture scrolls known in English as Scrolls Of Frolicking Animals, the work of modern artists Ikeda Manabu and Akira Yamaguchi, and films such as Kung Fu Panda and Studio Ghibli's *Spirited Away*.**

This sounds like a pitch from a wildly optimistic forum post: the kind of dream collaboration that could happen but probably never will. We did, admittedly, check the date when we first learned that NanaOn-Sha, the creator of *Parappa The Rapper*, and iNiS, maker of *Gitaroo Man* and *Osu! Tatakae! Ouendan*, were working together on a new narrative-led rhythm-action game, keen to ensure we hadn't been fooled. Apparently not. Project Rap Rabbit (that is, thankfully, a working title) is entirely real, and currently in development across the two studios, with a crowdfunding campaign just around the corner.

It's exciting news for those of us who fondly remember the two studios' previous games, though it's hard to ignore the fact that it's been some time since either studio has been in the spotlight. Since *Ouendan* and its westernised successor *Elite Beat Agents*, iNiS has kept busy, having pivoted towards mobile and casual games including the likes of *Lips* for Microsoft, and *Just Sing* and *The Hip-Hop Dance Experience* for Ubisoft. NanaOn-Sha, meanwhile, co-developed 2011 horror adventure *Haunt*, but otherwise has been working on mobile and console projects local to Japan. But with the recent 20th-anniversary remaster of *Parappa The Rapper* having brought **Masaya Matsuura**'s seminal rhythm-action game to a new audience, it's the ideal time for these two studios to get back to doing what they do best.

As it transpires, it's perhaps surprising it hasn't happened sooner, since Matsuura and iNiS COO **Keiichi Yano** have been close friends for years. "I have great respect for Matsuura-san as he is the reason I'm in the game industry," Yano tells us. "He inspired myself and many others into creating games that featured music as a core mechanic."

But the two only partnered up after UK publisher PQube approached Yano last year to discuss ideas for a new music game. Impressed by PQube's fan community, Yano sensed an opportunity to explore some concepts he'd been mulling over for a while. "That's when I approached Matsuura-san," he says. "He and I have a long-standing relationship and we've discussed many great ideas for how music games could evolve."

"We definitely seek to cultivate a new style of rhythm-action game that we ourselves can be excited about"

**In other words,** this was never going to be a simple *Parappa*-style rhythm game with a different character, nor a reskinned *Ouendan* – though it will borrow elements from both games. "From the get-go, we knew that the game should be story-based as we are some of the few creators that have built story-based music games," Yano says. "We knew it couldn't be a simple 'follow the music and rhythm' style of game as we've done in the past," Matsuura adds. "We believed that the next generation of music games should be more player-centric and allow expression, while still being a game. We definitely seek to cultivate a new style of rhythm-action game that we ourselves can be excited about."

Even so, it's a surprise when Yano reveals two of the key influences. "We've taken inspiration from modern open-world games such as *Fallout* and *Horizon Zero Dawn* – where having freedom does not necessarily have to restrict the gameplay, but rather open up choice," he says. "We felt that a rap game should be about how the lyrics ride on top of the rhythm and that the lyrics [in particular] should be an important focus. The dialogue systems on those games provided some early hints as to how we could structure this." Which isn't to say you should expect a vast open world. "The basic structure will be level-based, with unique music applied to each stage," Matsuura confirms.

If two western games have informed Project Rap Rabbit, its own story – the synopsis for which Matsuura has penned – is firmly steeped in eastern culture. The game takes place in an alternate-history Japan during the 16th century, in the aftermath of an unspecified calamity. It's a fragmented place populated by anthropomorphic animals, who have become insular and distrusting of others: the various territories, with their very different ways of life, might not be at war, but they're not on the friendliest of terms. Toto-Maru, a rabbit and farmer, eventually decides enough is enough and embarks on a journey to unite the kingdom. What better way to fix a world in turmoil than via the power of hip-hop? To which end, he travels to neighbouring territories and engages in rap battles with their leaders.

The game systems have yet to be fully finalised, but we're told that these face-offs will be reminiscent of *Parappa*, adopting the same call-and-response structure, where you'll use the four face buttons to spit rhymes. So far, so familiar,




**This interface mock-up shows the emotion system and the *Parappa*-style call-and-response mechanics. The game will include calibration options that were noticeably absent from *Parappa*'s recent PS4 return**

then, but there's more to it than that. "We've always discussed the difficulty of providing some freedom of expression while still maintaining the essence of what our fans expect a music game to be," Matsuura says. "I believe that this collaboration can provide one interesting solution to this difficult problem."

That solution, while still subject to change, currently takes the form of a *Mass-Effect* style dialogue wheel, which lets you choose between different emotions, opening up several lines of attack when responding to your rival. Each has its own rhythm to follow, but there's no 'wrong' choice here – though certain choices deployed at the right time will produce higher scores, you won't be punished as long as you follow the beat.

Meanwhile, your opponents will enter different states depending on how the battle is progressing. Specific moves might be more effective if they're exhausted, or you can use the extra breathing space as an opportunity to heal. Extra depth comes from the ability to pick out words from your opponent's raps to use against them for a revenge bonus. Though it should be as accessible as a *Parappa* or *Ouendan*, there's room for high-level play if you're familiar with the lines and can recognise how they link up. You can even call in different emotions in the middle of a line for an extra score bonus. Both songs and story will have multiple paths; the publisher describes it as "a rhythm-action *OutRun*", as if it didn't sound appealing enough already.

**It's quite a** departure for both Matsuura and Yano. While *Parappa* offered a degree of flexibility by letting you freestyle as long as your button presses kept time with the track, by and large rhythm-action games prefer to ask players to follow the music, rather than create it. "Choice doesn't necessarily have to mean 'creation' per se," says Yano. "Rather, it is giving players differing goals based on their choices, and rewarding players differently." It has, Matsuura admits, been a challenge to make this work. "But we believe there is precedence in other styles of game that have informed our current design. We are trying to push limits and expand boundaries, so nothing comes easy."

The game is primarily being developed by iNiS, with NanaOn-Sha providing additional creative leadership. "Game development is a very organic process and I'm sure roles may shift from time to time, but the important thing is that Yano-san and I collaborate on the creative direction and production-leadership aspects," says Matsuura. But has the friendship of these two old pals been tested by working together? "We are always at each other's throats!" Matsuura says. "Jokes aside, I believe both of us have enough experience to know when and where there are gaps and to fill them as necessary."

Funding is one of the gaps in Project Rap Rabbit that needs plugging, and so Yano, Matsuura and team are heading to Kickstarter for support. The target, which is yet to be finalised as we go to press, will give the team enough to build the game for PlayStation 4 and PC, though additional Switch and Xbox One versions will be among the stretch goals. The traditional publisher-funded route, Matsuura tells us, was never really on the cards. "Because of the aggressive design of the game, we wanted to make sure that we could keep the necessary creative freedom and control while still creating a triple-A music title," he explains. "The genre is really begging for a fresh approach – and what better platform than Kickstarter is there to get the community excited and on board?"

Yano agrees. "As creators, it's always scary to reveal your ideas very early in the process, but I'm with Matsuura-san in that we need to get the community excited for a new type of music game. Additionally, there is a perceived risk in creating a story-based music game that we believe has been missing from the equation for a while now. Kickstarter is a great platform to generate the necessary support to execute on this well."

It's an ambitious plan, but Project Rap Rabbit has a team with the talent to pull it off. Atsushi Saito, who created the concept for the original *Ouendan* during an internal game jam at iNiS, is the artist behind the game's stylised 3D ukiyo-e aesthetic. And veteran composer Yuji Takenouchi, who in recent years has contributed to the sound design of the *Dark Souls* series, will be the audio director. After years of toiling in comparative obscurity, the two musically minded friends in charge are clearly thrilled to be returning to the worldwide stage, in the genre through which they made their names. "It's a really good time for us to think about an international project again," Matsuura enthuses, demonstrating the kind of belief that led his most famous creation to rap success. All he and Yano need now is their very own cheer squad to push this pioneering project over the line. ■



**Every good hero needs a sidekick, and Toto-Maru is no exception. He'll be joined on his journey by the loyal Otama-Maru**





**Masaya Matsuura (top) and Keiichi Yano have been friends for years, but never colleagues**

# Beyond infinity

After a remarkable 2016, what's next for Rez creator Tetsuya Mizuguchi?

**Tetsuya Mizuguchi** had a busy time of it in 2016. In its first full calendar year in business, his studio Enhance Games released *Lumines: Puzzle & Music*, a touchscreen-powered spin on his PSP puzzler. And in October, Enhance delivered the defining game of the PlayStation VR launch. *Rez Infinite* – and in particular Area X, an all-new level that abandoned *Rez*'s on-rails action in favour of free movement – was, like the original game, an instant classic.

After all that, you'd forgive Mizuguchi and team for putting their feet up a bit. But work has already begun on Enhance's next project – inevitably, he's giving little away about that – while the man himself has continued to travel extensively. Yet while last year Mizuguchi and Enhance toured *Rez Infinite* around the videogame convention circuit, this year the remit has been broader: it says much about the power of *Rez Infinite* in VR that the game has now been showcased at events such as SXSW and Sundance Film Festival.

> "VR tends to be more of a closed, or isolated, experience, whereas AR and MR open it up"

A big part of that is the Synaesthesia Suit, the ludicrous, full-body costume with 26 points of vibration that was designed by Mizuguchi and a team of his former students at Keio University. Getting it and the game in front of people with no particular interest in videogames has, Mizuguchi tells us, been inspiring.

"It was really well received – everyone seems to enjoy the entire experience," he says. "I had many interesting conversations with people who were curious about the suit, and events like these give me a chance to think about its potential future form. I'm very thankful for everyone's interest; it started out as an experimental research project, so being invited to Sundance and SXSW is a great honour."

That's all very well, but there's only one thing we really want to know. What's the latest on those tentative plans for a commercial version of the suit? When we first wore it, at *Rez Infinite*'s unveiling at PlayStation Experience 2015, we were told that, if there were enough interest, Enhance would look into a way of getting the suit – in cut-down form, most likely – onto store shelves. Well, after more than a year on the convention circuit, during which just about everyone who has worn the full thing has come away raving about it, surely bringing it to market is a no-brainer? "I can't tell you," Mizuguchi says. "But you and me both, we know we want one, right?"

Yet it is Mizugichi's recent experiences of making games, not peripherals, that's brought him to a tricky fork in the road. Last year he made a game for mobile – the biggest gaming market on the planet, certainly, but an increasingly difficult one in which to succeed. VR is almost the opposite: it's a smaller market, so it's easier to stand out, but the margins of success are inherently lower. Perhaps unsurprisingly – he's a creative first, a businessman second – Mizuguchi sees his future in the latter category.

"The mobile market is large, but mature and overwhelming. Not necessarily in a bad way – it's all about speed in so many ways, with no signs of slowing down. The devices are powerful, you can deliver rich content, and it's only going to get better. But the VR market has only just begun. The devices are high-end products, but are definitely a path to the future. There's [going to be] so much growth in the coming years, and that excites me. It gives me hope that I can realise the ideas I have in my head."

**DEVELOPING STORY**
**One of Mizuguchi's next stops on the convention circuit will be the Develop Conference. Held at the Hilton Metropole in Brighton between July 11 and 13, this year's event features keynote addresses from Brenda and John Romero, legendary computer-graphics researcher Ken Perlin, and Mizuguchi himself. His session, Beautiful Dream, will see him joined by Edge editor Nathan Brown for a look back on Mizuguchi's storied career, and hopefully offer a teasing glimpse of his future plans. Tickets are available now from developconf.com.**



**Those ideas, it** transpires, have expanded beyond VR, to the emerging horizons of augmented and mixed reality. While each involves different technology – and, you'd think, different design approaches – Mizuguchi sees them all as parts of a greater whole. "I don't see, or haven't set, any borderlines between them," he says. "I just put them together in one giant bucket. VR tends to be more of a closed, or isolated, experience, whereas AR and MR open it up by integrating the real world. I'm sure pairing them with new technologies – whether the Internet Of Things, blockchain, or something else – will take things to a whole new level. Just thinking about how they will influence or affect our daily lives makes me extremely excited."

For the time being, however, we wait. After one of the broadest launch line-ups of any piece of gaming hardware in history, it's all gone a bit quiet for PSVR; software continues to dribble out for Rift and Vive, but those expecting the second wave of VR gaming to kick off in earnest in 2017 may be, so far at least, a little disappointed by sparse release schedules. All Mizuguchi will say about how he sees VR's second-generation games is that he hopes they "take the fundamentals of VR to a higher level and demonstrate the greatness of VR. That's what gamers want, and it's what I want to create as well." To be honest with you, we'd be happy enough with another *Rez*. Mizuguchi, however, appears to have grander plans. ■



Mizuguchi's Develop session will be the keynote on the final day of the conference. Edge readers can get 10 per cent off tickets using the code LYMEET

# Punching out

Genyo Takeda, Nintendo's first game designer, is calling it a day after 45 years

Between Satoru Iwata's sudden passing in July 2015 and Tatsumi Kimishima's appointment as Nintendo's fifth president two months later, Shigeru Miyamoto was the obvious choice to temporarily steer the ship. But alongside him was a man who, at the end of June, will bring down the curtain on a 45-year tenure at the company. **Genyo Takeda** may not be as famous as creatives such as Miyamoto, Takashi Tezuka or Eiji Aonuma, but he's been equally crucial in shaping the direction of modern Nintendo.

Takeda was recruited by Gunpei Yokoi in 1972 and inducted into Nintendo's R&D2 department, where he worked on a lightgun shooting-range game called *Laser Clay Shooting System*. The (possibly apocryphal) story goes that Takeda saved the day when the first machine's unveiling to the public went wrong. From behind the scenes, he controlled the game's clay pigeons, registered each hit and tallied up the players' scores manually, the illusion proving so convincing to punters that no one registered anything was amiss.

He moved into hardware design, heading up Nintendo's third (and smallest) research and development team, while still developing software. Indeed, Takeda designed horse-racing arcade game *EVR Race*, considered to be the company's first official foray into the videogame industry. Iwata and Miyamoto later credited him as "Nintendo's first game designer". Miyamoto and Takeda would go on to work together on several games, including 1979's *Sheriff* and the original arcade version of *Punch-Out*. The latter demonstrated Takeda's pragmatism when, after the success of *Donkey Kong*, Nintendo ended up with a surplus of monitors. Takeda subsequently conceived a boxing game that used two displays.

*Punch-Out* was also notable for being a conscious tilt at the American market. Takeda worked closely with Nintendo Of America to ensure the game would appeal to an audience outside Japan, and came up with the game's humorous character names himself. Despite his reputation as a logician, Miyamoto was an admirer of Takeda's "free-wheeling" creative approach. In an interview celebrating the release of the Wii remake of *Punch-Out*, Miyamoto paid tribute to Takeda's forward thinking: "In the era when there was no standard formula for how to make videogames in the first place, there were two schools of thought: the people who went to companies that could make videogames, and the people who would try and make games themselves. Takeda-san raised the banner of the latter, and he is still driving this era at Nintendo."

> "I became keenly aware of the fact that there is no end to the desire of those who just want more"

Takeda's pioneering spirit resulted in a number of innovations for Nintendo. He developed the battery back-up for the original *The Legend Of Zelda*, and was responsible for the analogue stick on the N64 controller. Though hardly the first of its kind, it was the first console controller to have one, and it's owed a debt by just about every controller released since.

However, Wii might be Takeda's most enduring legacy. Many years earlier, he'd already been thinking about motion controls, drawing up ideas for a boxing-glove interface during the planning stages of *Punch-Out* that was eventually rejected.



**Genyo Takeda leaves Nintendo at the end of June. His replacement will be Ko Shiota, who also worked on Wii U**

**A WII LOOK**
**If the Wiimote and *Wii Sports*, as the perfect conduit for the intuitive controller, were fundamental to Wii's success, the hardware's sleek, unassuming design was a major factor in appealing to a mainstream audience. Takeda had recognised that the look of the console was particularly important: "One of our main goals is for Wii to be accessible to everyone in the family, rather than just another toy for the children," he said. "From that point of view, we also had to consider Wii's appearance and fashionability, even if these are contradictory goals when you're the one counting the pennies." Takeda was also responsible for the distinctive blue light on the Wii's disc slot, demanding it be implemented for the console's E3 debut. A warm reception for the feature convinced Nintendo to use it in the finished hardware.**

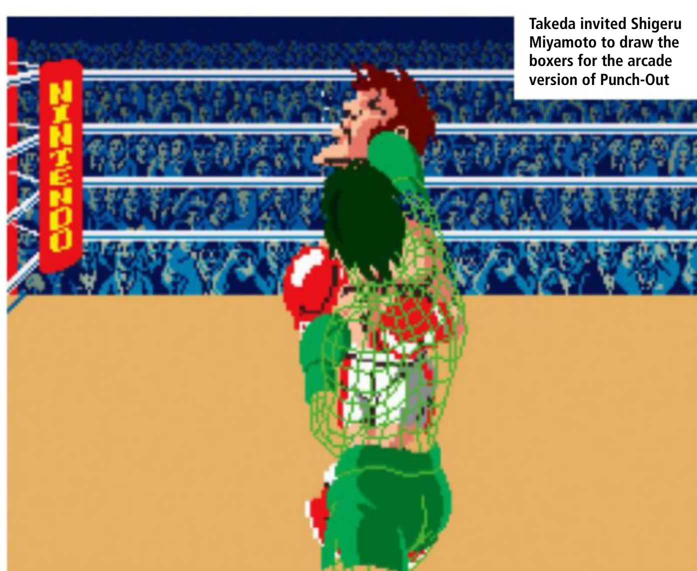
And a year into development of the Wii hardware, he began to express concerns about the technological arms race in games, wondering whether "faster and flashier" was really the best course for Nintendo to follow. "I became keenly aware of the fact that there is no end to the desire of those who just want more," he said. "Give them one, they ask for two. Give them two, and next time they will ask for five instead of three. Then they want ten, 30, a hundred. Giving in to this will lead us nowhere in the end." Whether you agree or not, the huge success of Wii proved he was right in one sense. There *was* another way forward.

**As a key** influence on Nintendo's shift away from raw horsepower, it's perhaps fitting that Takeda should be retiring just as Switch seems to be striking gold. After all, here is a console whose marketing has focused almost exclusively on the experience of playing it, its specs barely a side note. And that free-wheeling spirit is present in *Arms*: with its inventive new twist on pugilism and its larger-than-life characters, it's the closest we're likely to get to a successor to *Punch-Out*.

Despite his achievements, Takeda's place was never in the spotlight. In that sense, he had something in common with one of his team's least successful ideas. The Wii U console's inconspicuous design was intended to focus attention on the GamePad controller, which ultimately proved the device's undoing. "At the start of development, Takeda-san gave us the task of making the console a 'stagehand', a kind of unobtrusive role behind the scenes," developer **Yasuhisa Kitano** said. Such was the hallmark of Genyo Takeda: a man in the background, making sure everything worked as it should. ■




If the analogue stick was the N64's defining feature – powering launch title ***Super Mario 64*** and setting a new industry standard – its expandability was also key. The add-on Rumble Pak provided the first example of force feedback in a console controller




**Takeda invited Shigeru Miyamoto to draw the boxers for the arcade version of Punch-Out**




**One of Takeda's main aims when designing Wii was reducing power consumption to counter rising electricity costs**









TOP **Miyamoto was the artist on 1979's Takeda-designed arcade game *Sheriff*.** MIDDLE **NES adventure *StarTropics* was another of Takeda's creations.** ABOVE **Takeda's battery backup for the original *Zelda* made password saves an option, rather than the mandatory standard**



Puzzles mix contextual and logical conundrums, and many will require you to figure out how to use the various objects you amass throughout the game



# SLEEPING AID

## Bedtime Digital plucks another dreamy game from the imagination

*Figment*'s beautiful hand-painted artwork clothes what developer Bedtime Digital Games describes as a "musical action-adventure". Like the studio's previous game, *Back To Bed*, *Figment*'s world is a dreamscape manifested by the subconscious, and combines a whimsical art style with a story that touches on darker themes – in this case, trauma, disease and death. Creatures within it represent the voices you might hear in your head as well as emotions, and protagonist Dusty is the mind's courage. This wooden-sword-wielding, fearless grump must fight off a number of nightmarish – but vocally talented – creatures who sing while they go about corrupting the place.

"It was a clear goal for us from the start to build a connected world for the player to adventure through, a world that also existed before the game starts with depth and details to explore and discover during gameplay," lead game designer **Jonas Byrresen** tells us. "This also led us to a huge focus on music, since music can help set the mood and thereby create depth in the game world. Where it really shines, though, is when narrative and gameplay is tied into the music – such as when objects change the music when you're near them. As a result, puzzles and enemies are tied to the beat of the music, and the main villains actually sing."

The look of the game was inspired by a wide range of influences, including *Back To Bed* and the work of Studio Ghibli, and the decision to hand-paint the world was partly down to the team's previous experience with the technique.

"We wanted to utilise our artists who have all worked with analog art before, and this allowed us to bring their experience and styles from that into the digital world," Byrresen explains. "But we also have a fondness for looking at a screen as if it were a picture frame – what you put in that frame must be able to grab attention and make people wonder. The hand-painted style is a great approach to that."

While no firm release date has been set, Bedtime is aiming for a summer release. ■

# Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"People used to ask, '**Will a videogame ever make you cry?**' But I really think 'Can a videogame make you laugh?' is the harder question."

Quite right, **Tim Schafer** – *Psychonauts*' Meat Circus reduced us to tears, though perhaps for the wrong reasons



"We got out to China… I couldn't get access. I was furious for four or five days. **I lost my spot** on the [raid] team, and all of a sudden that became more important than the snooker."

World champion snooker player **Neil Robertson** on how a *WOW* addiction briefly took priority over his career



"Our mission is to ensure women can **succeed and make choices** in any environment and in any profession. Why would we *not* do it in esports?"

**Diane Lynch** of all-female US school Stephens College on a new esports scheme. Hanzo main? No: Hanzo *major*

"I know we're called a grey marketplace, but there's nothing really grey about it. **People just don't understand our business model**."

The real model is, 'Be a grey marketplace but say you aren't,' right, G2A's **Mario Mirek?**

# ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



**Game** *Maximum Tune 5*
**Manufacturer** Bandai Namco

While accepted wisdom might have it that the western arcade scene is as good as dead, new locations are popping up surprisingly often in the US – and some a little closer to **Edge**'s home. Tamba Arcade recently opened its doors in Jersey; Vertigo did likewise in London's Whitechapel.

Things are on the up, if only a little – which perhaps explains why Bandai Namco's recent return to the western arcade scene is a cautious one. *Maximum Tune 5*, which is now available in the US and Canada, debuted in Japanese arcades more than two years ago. And it's been pared back somewhat for its western release, shorn of half its name, locked – at least at launch – to an older version of a game that has already been updated in its home nation, and running in a modified version of the *Mario Kart GP DX* cabinet, instead of a bespoke housing.

Still, it comes with support for network cards, dispensed on your first play and saving your progress and settings through Bandai Namco's Banapassport system. That's an essential feature for a game with a vast collection of cars (including Audis, BMWs, and Chevrolets) with robust tuning options, and a host of tracks and game modes. Online support, meanwhile, enables you to race against ghost cars from all over the world – including specific players. Deep and packed with things to do, it's just the sort of shot in the arm the western scene needs.



# My Favourite Game
# Mark Kinchen

US producer and DJ MK on classic consoles, queuing for midnight launches, and how gaming helps him produce

**Mark 'MK' Kinchen** is an American DJ and producer who first rose to prominence in the '90s with house hits Always and Love Changes – both featuring Alana Simon. Alongside his own music, Kinchen also produces and remixes tunes for other artists, and has worked with a number of huge names, including Will Smith, Lana Del Ray, Pet Shop Boys and even Celine Dion. But in between all of this work, he also has a console-collecting obsession to feed.

**When did you fall in love with games?**
The first system I had was a Magnavox Odyssey 2 – my grandfather got me one. Everyone knows that system sucked, but you didn't have many options. My next system was an Intellivision. Then I kind of backtracked and got an Atari 2600. And from then on I've had every console that's been out, pretty much.

**Your grandfather sounds progressive.**
I think Magnavox had some sort of employee discount where he worked because he wasn't into videogames – he just thought, 'This might be cool for my grandson.' I remember me and my brother used to laugh at how bad the graphics were – we'd put a game in and immediately start laughing.

**Have you still got those early machines?**
I bought them all again, so I still have them. I go on eBay and look for the console that has the most cartridges with it or is in the best condition, and I buy it and keep it in a box in my garage. I don't really play them because I don't have the time to, but I have them in case I ever want to. I think my favourite system growing up was the Atari 5200, so I'm always buying good condition 5200s, or cartridges that are unopened.

**TOO MANY DJS**
**Kinchen's early hits, Always and Love Changes, both reached number one in the US Billboard Hot Dance Music/Club Play chart in 1993 and 1994, respectively, while Always also made it to 69 in the UK Singles Chart in 1995. Kinchen has been releasing singles and albums since 1989, but his remix work is even more extensive, kicking off with his version of Inner City's Follow Your Heart in 1992 and more recently featuring the likes of Bastille, Clean Bandit, Aurora and Ellie Goulding. For news on tours, shows and releases, follow @MarcKinchen.**



**What was it about the 5200 that appealed to you?**
I was like 10, or something; at that age when it started to matter that you had a good system. The graphics were way better than Intellivision, it's got that cool metal stripe with a glossy black body, and it was one of the first systems to have four controller ports. It was a cool system.

**What else stands out from your collection?**
The Vectrex was a really good system, and I have a ColecoVision in there somewhere. I like all videogames, and I think I was just at that age where I had enough time to play them. Right around *Zelda* and *Phantasy Star* it was all about RPGs, and then the busier I got doing music I was just like, 'Argh, I can't play because I just don't have time.' There was a time when I was in New York and I went out and bought a videogame every day for like a year or two, whether it was for PC or one of my consoles. I was addicted.

> "I had Switch on preorder, but I went and hung out in line to see if I could get one anyway"

**It sounds like you like buying games as much as playing them.**
I have this crazy addiction of waiting in line when new systems go on sale. I had Switch on preorder, but I went and hung out in line to see if I could get one anyway. At midnight I stood there for an hour but didn't get one. The next morning I dropped my daughter off at school and I was passing by a Target and there was no line, so I went and bought a Switch.

**Did you cancel your preorder?**
Of course not, I have two! They're both grey but I did buy different controllers.

**Do you have two of anything else?**
I preordered Rift and a month before it was out I saw one on eBay, so I was like, 'I'm not waiting a month for it.' So now I have two Rifts [laughs]. I'm into simulators, and my manager is too – he has a pilot's licence.

**How do you fit games around your working life?**
I have every modern console in my studio, and any time I stop making music I'm like, 'I need to play a game for a second.' It zeroes my mind and then I can go back to the music. I have to play games that are quick, though, so it usually ends up being *Call Of Duty* because I can play quick matches. The only thing I play that's a little time consuming is *EA Hockey*. I play online – I've been playing hockey games since like '92, '93. I'm pretty good.

**So what's your favourite game?**
I'm going to have to say *Call Of Duty: Infinite Warfare*. But I like them all. The thing is I'm not that good. You'd think I was a 30- or 40-kill guy but sometimes I'm eight kills, sometimes I'm 20. I'm still loving playing it, though! ■




**Kinchen has sampled games in his music, including *MGS* and *Strider*. The latter game featured in an unreleased song of the same title, a white label of which recently sold on ebay for $1600**

## TV
**Loaded**
**bit.ly/loadedc4**
Created by Misfits and Fresh Meat writer Jon Brown (who we spoke to in **E**294), Loaded charts the lives of four friends after they sell their videogame studio to a large corporation. Idyl Hands' co-founders, Josh, Leon, Watto and Ewan, each net a personal fortune of £14 million from the sale, and each sets about adjusting to the profound change of circumstances in their own shambolic ways It's funny stuff, much of the humour arising from conscientious, put-upon Josh's attempts to wrangle his considerably less responsible friends and business partners. The show also makes a good fist of representing modern development studios – we're pretty sure we've visited Idyl Hands at some point – and while videogames aren't really its focus, there's an obvious reverence for them.



## VIDEO
**Nintendo PlayStation**
**bit.ly/playstation prototype**
While it first came to public attention in July 2015, the only known example of Sony's PlayStation prototype (which has come to be known as the Nintendo PlayStation) was only partially functional. While it would boot up and run SNES games, the CD-ROM-based PlayStation component of the device remained stubbornly dormant. However, in this episode of The Ben Heck Show, modder and presenter Ben Heckendorn successfully manages to fix the drive and get some software up and running on it. A momentous, if ultimately useless, achievement.

## WEB GAME
**Dungeon In A Bottle**
**bit.ly/dungeoninabottle**
While it might evoke traumatic memories of Disney's most saccharine ride, the theme for the 38th Ludum Dare – A Small World – has resulted in plenty of less sickly experiences. Among them is *Dungeon In A Bottle*, a fast-paced micro-platformer with a unique line in cruelty. In it, you must wall-jump your way to safety, reaching the exit in a series of single-screen levels as you attempt to escape a magic bottle. *Dungeon*'s trick is that the walls of each level are continuously closing in, and will crush you if left unchecked. Thankfully, you're able to push them back so long as you have some purchase or are jumping from them. But you're forced to wait for the walls to close in to be able to jump up, and things are soon complicated by the addition of spikes and awkward geometry.



# THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

## CHAIR
**Noblechairs Epic Series**
**bit.ly/noblechair**
You might have noticed a certain luxury in where esports pros park their backsides these days. The gaming chair has come an awfully long way, and while prices can be extortionate, more reasonable models can be found by those prepared to shop around. Noblechairs' offerings begin at £299, the cost difference achieved by using faux leather instead of the real thing – though it's breathable, which might be preferable for those who enjoy lengthy sessions on hot summer days. Comfy and flexible, the only drawback is a metal bar that supports the backrest and may, if you're not careful, cause serious harm during an otherwise painless set-up process.




## continue

**Galaxian**
Pac-Man finds his way into *Guardians Of The Galaxy Vol. 2*

**Wake up**
505 Games' investment means Remedy's output is going multiformat

**Substance abuse**
Speedrunner completes *Prey* in 20 minutes thanks to Gloo habit

**Back to life**
Germany finally gets an uncensored version of *Half-Life*

## quit

**Search engine**
*Prey* has shown the way: no more cupboard-opening buttons, please

**Eyes wide shut**
Facebook closes down Emmy-award-winning Oculus Story Studio

**No matter what**
Bethesda's lawyers go after *Prey For The Gods* dev No Matter Studios

**Bad memory**
A save-game-wiping crash resulted in a heavy-footed retread

## TWEETS

When specific game discussions turn from playing great games to which piece of plastic I own I feel like we've lost the plot a bit.
**Phil Spencer** @XboxP3
Head of Xbox, Microsoft

Rare non-political tweet! *Zelda* is astonishing. Maybe the greatest game ever.
**Graham Linehan** @Glinner
Writer and director

Sometimes when it's late at night, and I'm alone with only my thoughts for company, I think about those who care about frame rate and I cry.
**Ian Dickson** @SpectralHands
UK PR manager, Square Enix Europe

Whiteboard says "love" in green loopy script in the middle of my v serious game design notes at exact highest height six-year-old can reach.
**Adam Saltsman** @ADAMATOMIC
Indie developer



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# DISPATCHES JULY




Issue 306

## Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a year's subscription to PlayStation Plus, courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment



PlayStation.Plus

### Wake-up jab

Much has been said about the lack of well-executed female characters in videogames. It's recognised that while there is progress – the *Tomb Raider* reboot, *Mirror's Edge*, *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, etc – we still have a long way to go. What's not so well recognised is that very often a developer's approach to female characters is internally inconsistent. It's not just that many games lack well-executed female characters, but that even well-executed female characters can get lost in a stream of more or less discriminatory design decisions.

If we divide a game into four parts – narrative, gameplay, audio and visual – the inconsistency can be within or across these parts, and can be more or less subtle. For example, the *Mass Effect* effect: a character-creation menu tells you that the choice of female or male makes no difference to gameplay, but for some reason most female characters wear heels, tight-fitting leather and are shown predominantly from behind in cutscenes, even when they are mashing local flora and fauna into bloody bits. Or the *Uncharted* formula: there is a balance between the number of male and female characters, but the latter are usually in some way driven by, or reliant on, the former.

"Over time, under stress and across teams, implicit bias ends up overriding good intentions"

One would think that if a decision is made to tackle the representation of female characters seriously, that decision would be followed through at every stage of development. So why isn't it? I suppose the charitable explanation is just that, because game development is such a large undertaking, it's difficult to monitor consistency. Perhaps over time, under stress and across different teams, implicit bias ends up overriding good intentions. The cynical explanation is a lot more worrying: sex sells, so even if some progressive decisions are taken, developers must ensure that their female characters remain fundamentally, conventionally attractive.

It will be interesting to see if and how this gets tackled. Will there be a 'consistency police' on development teams, or a push from the modding community or from the leading videogame auteurs? Probably not. More likely, as with many other things, it will be the indie developers who show that one can turn a profit without discriminating.
**Leo Tarasov**

Beautifully put, though we're not touching this because we would no doubt upset The Guardian again. A PS Plus sub is on its way.

### Just defend

Having started reading the latest issue of **Edge** (**E**305), I can't help but feel that even the best gaming magazine in the world can sometimes fall victim to a nasty bias. 'Ubisoft-bashing' is seemingly in fashion and I find your reviews of two of their recent releases, well, unfair. But it's mostly in contrast to the treatment other publishers receive that I believe some of you guys may be in urgent need of an examination of conscience. *Breath Of The Wild* is a great game: it deserves all the praise and accolades it received, and not just from **Edge**. But is Nintendo's first truly open world a timeless masterpiece to Ubisoft's unimaginative, iterative daubing? Hardly.

I guess it all comes down to what one expects from an open-world game. There is an incredible sense of wonder when exploring Hyrule's poetically mysterious landscape, something conspicuously (and completely) absent from *Wildlands*, but for all its shortcomings, it still does make me want to visit Bolivia, in the same goofy way that the Top Gear special did a few years back. I can only assume that the game's visuals do the country's natural environment better justice than its plot and cast do its




inhabitants, but even if the real-world vistas are only half as glorious as their renderings, I won't be disappointed.

So thumbs-up, Ubisoft: even though I wish you'd hire new writers and drop the awful 'America First' attitude (aren't you a French company?), on aesthetic merit alone, your latest title certainly deserves much better than a 4.

**Fabrice Saffre**

We like Ubisoft a lot. But its open-world formula is wearing thin, and *Wildlands*' politics were spectacularly ill-judged. Perhaps if Nintendo put out an open-world *Zelda* every six months and had Link spout the UKIP manifesto, we'd feel differently.

## Advancing guard

I'm still stuck in the past, but I'm creeping closer to the present. In my letter printed in **E**290 I mentioned how I haven't caught up with new releases and hardware and have a stack of unfinished games gathering dust. That is still the case. I have, however, made the leap to the current generation by picking up a PS4. This is great but I still don't feel like I'm up to date. This has been the strongest start to a year in a long time and I haven't played a single one of these fantastic new games. My Twitter feed is full to the brim with gushing praise making me feel like I'm missing out.

It seems that most of the games I've picked up for my skinny new PlayStation are last-gen remasters such as *The Last Of Us*, *Uncharted* and the *Modern Warfare* rehash. This is mostly to do with the fact that my last console was a 360 and I'm catching up on what I missed out on last time around. I haven't had the time or the funds to get around to brand spanking new games like *The Last Guardian* or *Horizon* and now I really feel like I'm missing out with the release of Switch and *BOTW*. And what with parenthood (an increasingly common theme among **Edge** readers) only months away I am not likely to catch up anytime soon.

I seem to spend more time reading about new games than actually playing them, which is OK because I enjoy reading as much as gaming. I've decided that I'm happy in my slightly out-of-date gaming bubble. I'll do things at my own pace. Sod what everyone is playing right now. So, I'll experience the future of interactive entertainment through the pages of **Edge** while I play through the past on my journey towards the present.

PS, I still haven't finished *Okami* or *FFXII*.

**Alex Evans**

People who try to keep up with new game releases knew all about Fear Of Missing Out long before there was an acronym for it. That said, this year really has been amazing.

## Random select

As I finally watched my character send the dealer to his doom in *Hand Of Fate*, I thought once again of Roguelikes and permadeath. There is no question that Roguelikes have been an enormous boon for a great many independent studios. They create their own compulsive replay loops and allow a resource-strapped team to portion out their offerings in smaller amounts within any given play, extending a game's play time on a smaller amount of content.

I have invested a significant amount of time on these games, from the star-faring of *FTL* and *BattleStation: Harbinger*, the morbid survival of *This War Of Mine* and *Don't Starve*, the top-down action-shooter tendencies of *Nuclear Throne* and *The Binding Of Isaac*. And having done so, what I feel a need to say to indies who are contemplating adding their own offerings to the permadeath-Roguelike pile is this: don't.

Or at the very least, seriously consider if permadeath is sacrificing what might be a better game for the player in the name of serving the needs of the developer.

At this point, what is disturbingly clear to me is that the Roguelike/permadeath trend covers up a myriad of design sins, sins that sometimes become clear to the player over multiple plays, other times only upon cheating and discovering that what was presented as a contest of skill and preparation versus the odds was never really anything but a roll of the dice.

Even within the pages of **Edge**, games have received coverage that are capable of procedurally generating maps that are impossible for the player to complete. Not merely difficult. Impossible. I allow a little slack for games that only take a few minutes for a successful run, and a little more in acknowledgment of the fact that a team of four working out of someone's basement may not have access to the testing resources of EA or Activision available to them.

But as I have entered my 40s, my tolerance for games that are willing to waste hours of my life on a bad random number has grown slim indeed. The pitch reads all too similarly to that of a predatory croupier, or even a carnival midway barker: "Ooh, too bad. Try again? It's sure to go your way this time!" It is not too much to ask of designers that their games be fair, that any given procedural generation have a player-perceivable path that could lead to success, that the tools necessary for that success be made available to the player, and that a winnable set of assets not be locked away behind the gate of having failed 25 times. It's entirely possible to make a game that ticks all of those boxes and is still challenging, engaging, and worth the player's time and money.

And more to the point, if a team isn't willing to give players such an experience, we need to hold them accountable. We need to stop accepting 'shell game' compulsion loops as a lazy substitute for thoughtful and well-implemented game systems.

If your coding team can't give that to us, maybe you shouldn't be making games. Or at the very least, think twice about the flippin' permadeath, will ya?

**Benjamin Kuhner**

have fixed the algorithm yet a while ago, let's see if the IT bods We tried this joke. ■



STEVEN POOLE

# Trigger Happy

## Shoot first, ask questions later

They do elections better in France. Quite apart from the eminently sensible rule that no campaigning or publishing of opinion polls are allowed within 24 hours of the polls opening, French politicians also make better campaign videogames. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the firebrand anti-corporate lefty, surged from nowhere in a few months to be a real contender in the French presidential election. In the event he came a close fourth, but one of the things his campaign will likely be remembered for is what is probably the best example yet seen of a videogame as naked propaganda.

*Fiscal Kombat*, as Mélenchon's game is called, was developed by an anonymous collective of French gamers who call themselves Discord Les Insoumis. It's a 16bit-styled side-scrolling brawler in the tradition of *Streets Of Rage*, and the hero is a pixellated Mélenchon, with steel-grey pompadour hairstyle, who strides down the streets picking up wealthy pinstriped men before they can punch him, and shaking stolen money from their pockets before hurling them to the left or right. "You should be happy to pay taxes," digi-Mélenchon chides a banker. "Don't fool yourself: you have millions, but there are millions of us." At the end of your game, your score in euros is added to the public coffers along with that of everyone else who has played, thus imbuing a serene sense of having laboured well for the public good.

Back in the '90s, the far-right Front National made a version of *Pac-Man* in which Jean-Marie Le Pen raced around the maze collecting French tricolore flags. In the US in 2003, there was a Howard Dean for Iowa canvassing game (made by Persuasive Games) to help the Democratic primary candidate. And campaigning games may be common in the future, as candidates hope to reach the kinds of voters who either don't engage in political discussion at all, or who distrust anything they see in the mainstream media but are pathetically credulous of any maverick claiming to bust through the conspiracy with alternative facts.



Illustration kaeru.com.ar

> If digital ultraviolence has zero effect, then presumably political campaign games are also a waste of time

None of the main parties in Britain has yet released a general-election videogame, but one can fondly imagine a realistic stealth-ninja affair in which a sword-wielding Theresa May stabs and slashes a swathe through the saboteurs in her own parliament, while Labour may well release an educational romp in which your Corbynite avatar spends all his time beating up enemies within his own party while, on a far-distant misty mountaintop, the entire British electorate soberly gathers to vote for someone else.

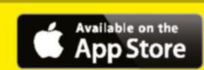
The general and little-questioned assumption on this topic, though, is that political games can play a useful part in winning voters during an election campaign. At the same time, we are loath to grant videogames a comparable persuasive potency when it comes to actions we consider harmful. For very good reasons, for example, we tend to be sceptical of any research claiming that violent media make people more violent. Already in 2017, two academic studies that claimed such a link, and garnered much publicity at the time, have been retracted. So I for one can rest easily and continue to enjoy murdering Nazis from a safe distance in the brilliant *Sniper Elite 4*.

But this question isn't going to go away; it's going to get more urgent and confounding. Your cartoonish and kinetically satisfying standard console murder sim is one thing, but what about motion-controlled killing in VR? The psychic effects of a VR game in which you stab someone in the neck by physically emulating the precise action of stabbing are going to be, at best, unpredictable. For this reason the writer Angela Buckingham recently argued in Aeon magazine that VR murder should be illegal. You may not want to go that far, but it's going to be something to address seriously.

At the very least, when it comes to the question of whether videogames influence thinking and behaviour, we cannot have our cake and eat it too. If digital ultraviolence has zero effect, then presumably political campaign games are also a waste of time and money. But if political games can make a difference – and I for one have long argued that the embedded politics of even ordinary, commercial games, such as the national-security ideology that normalises brutality and torture, are a powerful form of stealth propaganda – then the question of what violent games do to us must logically remain one to be struggled with too.

*Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net*


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NATHAN BROWN

# Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

There are a few things guaranteed to immediately endear me to a videogame. Take the parry, for instance, the purest expression of videogame risk versus reward: you either look like the world's biggest badass, or simply get smacked in the face. I'm a fan, too, of double jumps, and of extravagant, Shoryuken-style uppercuts. But there are rubbish games with parries, some miserable ones with dragon punches, and some absolute stinkers with double jumps. My love for another little mechanic, however, has never served me wrong. I am talking about the humble taunt.

Take *Bayonetta*, which I've been enjoying afresh in its sumptuous new incarnation on PC and uses the taunt in dizzying, game-changing ways. It freezes the combo timer, enrages enemies, refills your magic bar and even, with the right accessory, restores your health. In *God Hand*, it's vital for crowd control, helping you manage big groups by drawing aggro one at a time. And in *Nier: Automata*, the taunt has a risk/reward element similar to the parry, greatly buffing your damage output, but raising your enemy's attack power by the same amount.

The brighter sparks among you – sorry, I'm in taunting mood now – will have spotted a theme. Yes, I love taunts. But I specifically love taunts in games that are about punching and kicking things in the face and body. And while the above examples are all from thirdperson action games, the purest, and best expression of a taunt – where there is no preprogrammed mechanical consequence to performing one – is in the one-on-one fighting game.

Yes, there were mechanical, character-specific consequences when you taunted in *Street Fighter III*. Shut up. In *Street Fighter IV* there were not, and yet I have never taunted so much in a videogame. Much of that is due to the group I played with – every round would begin with a synchronised taunt. For us it was a cheery hello, a beautiful celebration of a wonderful game. When I first saw it happen on a tournament stage, I was overjoyed.



Illustration **kaeru.com.ar**

Perhaps it gets him going, but to the viewer it's distasteful, unpleasant, an expression of brash, brattish disrespect

There's an American player named Du 'Nuckledu' Dang. In the *SFIV* era, he played as Guile, who had a rare ability: a crouching taunt. He'd stoop low, whip out a pair of sunglasses from his back pocket, and put them on. Dang would deploy this to beautiful effect in tournaments, using it to psyche himself up, whip up the crowd and maybe – though they never showed it – needle his opponent a little. It was unique. It was fun. And it worked. He was frequently the last remaining US player in a tournament held in the US; he was the local favourite underdog, so you could forgive him the odd dirty trick.

These days, Dang is one of the best in the world. He won the Capcom Cup last year, playing *Street Fighter V* – in which Guile wears shades by default. Instead, Dang has taken to teabagging, frantically crouching as if to whack his virtual nutsack on his prone foe's head. Perhaps it still gets him going, but to this viewer it's distasteful, unpleasant, an expression of brash, brattish disrespect.

And it's spreading. I switched off a stream in disgust recently because there was so much of it, with one particular up-and-comer even dropping combos in order to fit even more of it in. It alerted me to a problem I hadn't seen coming in esports, and particularly in fighting games. The new generation of world warriors all learned their craft playing online, where people, by virtue of anonymity, tend to be colossal fuckwits. Yet the fighting-game scene was born in the arcade, where you stood shoulder to shoulder with your enemy. As a kid I once took a hell of a dead arm for throwing an opponent three times in a row. If I'd tried to teabag him – and I'd explained what it was, because back then there was no known way to pretend you were slapping Bison in the face with Dhalsim's elastic, leathery man-glands – I'd have been smacked straight out of the arcade.

This upsets me, and not just in an 'old man shouts at cloud' kind of way. *SFV* got off to a miserable start, but Capcom's made some good changes and it's a much better spectator sport. I like watching *Street Fighter*, but I don't like seeing 20-something men playing a game deliberately badly just so they can dunk their avatar's scrotum in an opponent's metaphorical salty tears. Worst of all, I feel myself falling out of love with taunting a bit, and that worries me tremendously. If anyone ends up ruining *God Hand* for me, they're going to have more than a pretend pair of balls to worry about.

*Nathan Brown is* **Edge***'s editor, and has exhausted his supply of teabag metaphors. Send suggestions to the usual address*

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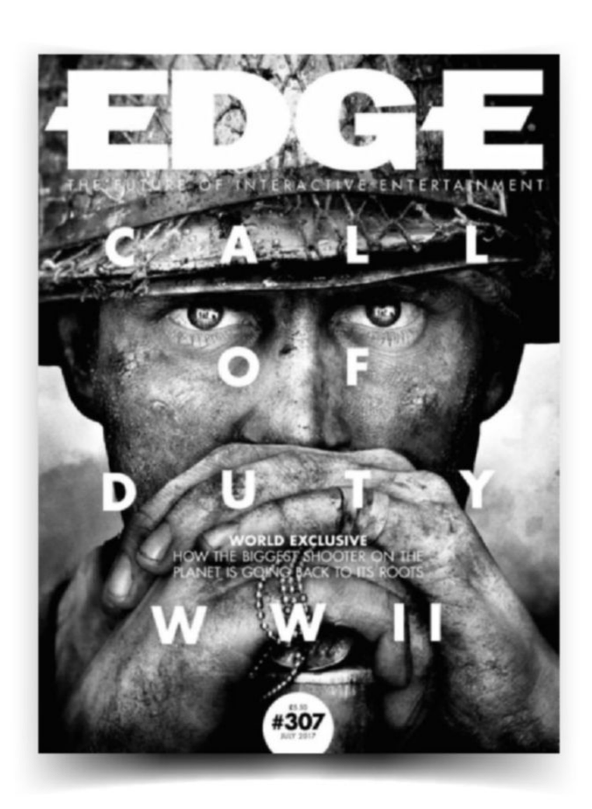
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# HYPE

## THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH





Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Hype content

# People power

While you'd think something with as broad an appeal as Star Wars should land in any context, *Star Wars Battlefront*, like Jar Jar Binks, is evidence to the contrary. The absence of a singleplayer campaign irked many, while still more took issue with what they saw as a lack of content in multiplayer. In response, EA has pooled the talents of Criterion, DICE and Motive to build a sequel (p34) that attempts to offer something for everybody. A substantial and robust multiplayer component, a fully operational singleplayer campaign and a more flexible toybox should go some way to winning back those who were disappointed by DICE's first attempt.

Capcom's *Marvel Vs Capcom* series, meanwhile, has long faced a similar problem – albeit for distinctly different reasons. The assemblage of Marvel and Capcom's best-loved characters should represent a hook with enormous mass-market appeal, yet the three-on-three fighter has long been feared for its bewildering complexity. In *Marvel Vs Capcom: Infinite* (p44), the studio has rejected the usual sequel mantra of 'more is more' and instead made a concerted effort to make the game more accessible.

Both games are the work of studios which are going out of their way to appeal to as broad a market as possible without compromising the core of their games. Another approach, of course, is to be unyielding – see FromSoftware's output – or, as is the case for two studios this month, to give players the tools to troll others.

*Divinity: Original Sin II*'s (p54) Game Master mode gives you everything you need to create your own stories as others work through your creation – or to punish them for giggles. Similarly, *Raiders Of The Broken Planet* (p52) gives one player the exclusive role of harrying a team of four defenders. While these two approaches are distinct, they share the same desire to offer something for everybody. Perhaps, despite what we've heard, it really is possible to appeal to all of the people, all of the time.

## MOST WANTED

**Project 7** TBA
*Quantum Break* was a fine piece of work that showed Remedy at its most confident and innovative. While early details offer no surprises, the announcement also promises that Project 7 will feature the studio's deepest mechanics yet.

**Super Mario Odyssey** Switch
That urban hub world remains a weirdly dull prospect, but the remarkable form that Nintendo is enjoying with the peerless likes of *Breath Of The Wild* and *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe* has got us all the more excited for its long-overdue return to freeform *Mario* level design.

**Darksiders III** PC, PS4, Xbox One
An accidental reveal sped up the release of a trailer in which we are introduced to Fury, the whip-wielding mage that players will control in Gunfire Games' hack-and-slash sequel. Here's hoping *Darksiders III* hews closer to the original game's *Zelda*-like design than the sequel's somewhat directionless open world.



HYPE

# STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT II

Three studios join forces to take on the biggest IP in the galaxy

| | |
|---|---|
| **Developer** | Criterion, DICE, Lucasfilm, Motive |
| **Publisher** | EA |
| **Format** | PC, PS4, Xbox One |
| **Origin** | Canada, Sweden, UK, US |
| **Release** | November 11 |



The return of space battles will cover all three eras. Ships shown so far include X-Wings, Y-Wings, TIE Fighters, Jango Fett's Slave I, the Millenium Falcon, prequel-era Jedi starfighters, and First Order TIE Fighters from the new films




# STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT II



Being partly a hologram stands in for the *Battlefield* tradition of being partly on fire for this year's round of EA-shooter promo artwork

DICE's *Star Wars: Battlefront* – confusingly, the third *Battlefront* game – arrived on the eve of Star Wars' resurgence as the world's dominant pop-culture juggernaut. It launched in 2015 a few weeks ahead of The Force Awakens, providing an accessible, if shallow, multiplayer FPS tied to an astonishing-looking tour through the conflicts of the original cinematic trilogy.

The most common complaint directed at it concerned its perceived paucity of content. LucasArts' original *Battlefront* games had focused on multiplayer, but spanned both movie trilogies, and provided an open sandbox for players to collide armies, vehicles and heroes as they wished. This new iteration, by contrast, hemmed the player in far more, on fewer maps, and stuck a premium pricetag on its season pass and expansions.

*Battlefront II* seems to have been designed to answer those criticisms at every step. Its announcement at the Star Wars Celebration in Orlando took the form of a string of crowd-pleasing reveals. It will have singleplayer. It will, in multiplayer, feature maps, characters and vehicles from every cinematic trilogy – including the latest one. There will be space battles. There *won't* be a season pass.

***"There was a lot of pent-up demand for a Battlefront story and a singleplayer campaign"***

"The first game is a first step," executive producer **Matt Webster**, who is also the general manager of *Burnout* creator Criterion, tells us. "So step two becomes [a matter of] building on top of something. Clearly there was a lot of pent-up demand for a *Battlefront* story and a singleplayer campaign. We also wanted to express our love for 40 real-world years of Star Wars. The first game was step one; step two is a giant step to cover the enormity of what Star Wars is."

The success of The Force Awakens – the sense that Star Wars is 'back', to the extent that it ever really left – is reflected in the way that Lucasfilm is investing deeply in the franchise in every medium it can reach. *Battlefront II*'s vastly expanded scope stems from an awareness of the potential breadth of the audience. "Our fans come from almost four generations," Lucasfilm senior director of franchise management **Douglas Reilly** says, "with very differing points of view: which movies they saw in theatres as a kid, which things they gravitate toward the most."

The biggest cheers in the auditorium were for Darth Maul and early art of the prequel planet Kamino, with jetpacking clone troopers fighting battle droids and Jedi starfighters clashing with Jango Fett's Slave I in the skies. These are fans for who the prequels were 'their' movies, despite the misgivings of older sections of the audience. EA and Lucasfilm are taking on the challenge of building a game for every part of that audience at once.

"In the last three or four years, we've been taking the approach that we want to tell different stories to different audiences in different media," Reilly says. "If you keep telling the same story with the same tone and the same aesthetic, it's going to become very trite and very dull very quickly."

**Achieving that breadth** within a single project has meant adopting an ambitious distributed development plan. While the series is DICE's to oversee, the Swedish studio is focusing on multiplayer ground combat. Singleplayer is being handled by Motive, the Montreal-based developer founded by *Assassin's Creed* producer Jade Raymond.

While sharing its fundamentals with multiplayer, the campaign has a much more specific focus. The story, co-written by *Spec Ops: The Line* writer Walt Williams and former IGN reporter Mitch Dyer, follows an Imperial special-forces unit, Inferno Squadron, in the aftermath of the Battle of Endor. As Imperial loyalist Iden Versio, you'll hunt down the rebellion in a campaign that spans the 30-year gap between the end of the original trilogy and the events of The Force Awakens.

"Our whole idea was to re-humanise something that's been dehumanised: the Stormtrooper in the helmet," Motive game director **Mark Thompson** says. "They have a number, and they're part of a legion, but you never know who they are as individuals. That was an interesting idea for us." Thompson cites the moment in The Force Awakens ▶



## New stars

*Battlefront II*'s female lead, Iden Versio, reflects Lucasfilm's growing commitment to diversity. "The reality of it is that strong female characters have been part of the Star Wars legacy for 40 years," says Douglas Reilly. "We've always viewed Star Wars as a reflection of society." This was a major theme of this year's Star Wars Celebration, from toy lines to animated shorts to – evidently – videogames. Versio joins Rey, Jyn Erso and Rebels' Sabine Wren and Hera Syndulla as part of a new generation of Star Wars leads. "For me, a good character is a good character," says Motive's Mark Thompson. "We were trying to explore a different perspective to what we'd seen in some of the movie storytelling."



ABOVE **Customisable droid companions will feature in both singleplayer and multiplayer. Versio's droid, pictured, will be able to sneak up on enemies and incapacitate them with an electricity attack.**
LEFT **Motive has drawn from newer Star Wars expanded-universe material in creating *Battlefront II*'s campaign, which is being considered canon by Lucasfilm**

ABOVE **Multiplayer heroes will be bound to the maps from their era: you'll be able to play as Kylo Ren on Starkiller Base, as in the picture above, but not Darth Maul or Yoda.** RIGHT **Iden Versio may be a tough sell, and not because of her gender. It will take some work from Motive's narrative team to make players empathise with a committed Stormtrooper**








when a traumatised Finn rips off his Stormtrooper helmet as an inspiration, although Versio's journey is different. After reacting with horror to the destruction of the Death Star, she will remain a Stormtrooper.

"It's very interesting to see a story told from the Empire's side," Reilly says. "We don't get that very often. When we look to games and other media it's an opportunity to tell a different story than the movies. We don't want to make movie games. We want to give our fans an insight into the stories and characters that they might not see on screen."

DICE is making changes to *Battlefront*'s fundamentals with a view to adding depth, both match by match and over the course of the player's time with the game. Classes, absent from the 2015 *Battlefront* but a staple of the original games, will return. Customisation of gear and skills will work on a class-by-class basis but also extend to hero characters, which include Yoda, Darth Maul, Rey, Luke Skywalker, and Kylo Ren (the latter two will also be playable in one-off missions in singleplayer). Heroes are described by DICE creative director **Berndt Diemer** as "more physical", implying DICE has taken note of the criticism levelled at the floaty, disconnected feel of the previous game's special characters.

***"When we look to games it's an opportunity to tell a different story than the movies"***



Space combat, notably absent from the initial release of 2015's *Battlefront*, will be present in *Battlefront II* from launch. Vehicle play is being handled by *Burnout* and *Need For Speed* veteran Criterion, which built the speederbike sections of the original game before working on PS4 *Battlefront* freebie *X-Wing VR Mission*. "Our history is very much in and around cars," says Criterion managing director **Matt Webster**, "but on the subsurface it's very much around gamefeel and fantasy fulfilment that just happened to be expressed by a car. It's a natural transition to take that into a starfighter or a speederbike."

Criterion promises smoother vehicle handling for *Battlefront II* along with a greater sense of speed. For DICE's part, vehicles will be incorporated into multiplayer in a more substantial way. As with your trooper and hero characters, your starfighters will have their own unlock trees and upgrades. DICE also hints at a resource system that will replace the original's vehicle-granting powerups. During a match you'll earn points that can be cashed in for upgrades, vehicles, or a turn as a hero character. Hopefully this means less time spent racing against your teammates for a shot at flying an X-Wing.



**DICE plans to place more emphasis on teamwork for *Battlefront II*, with the intent that a coordinated team of regular troops has a shot – albeit a small one – at taking out the likes of Darth Maul**

**There's some warranted** scepticism associated with the practice of spreading development of a blockbuster game across multiple studios, but in *Battlefront II*'s case the fact that each developer has a specific focus helps to justify the approach. "Game development is very much a collaboration now," Webster says. "Distributed development has been a thing for a long time, actually."

"And it's just going to get bigger and bigger," Thompson adds, "as games get bigger and bigger."

The fourth partner in *Battlefront II*'s creation is Lucasfilm itself, which acts in an advisory capacity on every aspect of the game. Designers from each studio are in daily contact with Lucasfilm, including the franchise-directing story group. "We're the connective glue, both creatively and design-wise," Reilly says. "Everything comes through us."

At this early stage, *Battlefront II* is demonstrating the upside of coupling broad-ranging collaboration to the vast resources that the Star Wars licence affords. How well each part of this ambitious whole gels together is the next question it will have to answer: even so, a game that attempts to do too much and falls short is likely to be better-received than a game that sets realistic goals for itself and charges players through the nose for each addition beyond that.

Above all, it marks the decisive end of Star Wars games' time in the wilderness. Its scope suggests a level of confidence that hasn't been associated with the series since the cancellation of *Star Wars 1313* in 2013. *Battlefront II* is an expression of the freedom and power that comes with finding yourself in the surging centre of the mainstream. ■



Designing cover for such large ships means even larger landmasses and buildings. Hiding behind skyscrapers and cliffs rather than concrete barriers certainly feels novel



HYPE

# DREADNOUGHT

Yager streamlines the city-sized craft at the heart of its epic war game

| | |
|---|---|
| **Developer** | Yager Development |
| **Publisher** | Grey Box Games |
| **Format** | PC, PS4 |
| **Origin** | Germany |
| **Release** | 2017 |







ABOVE **While there's no in-ship perspective, the camera's positioning gives rise to stirring views across the bow as you steer your mammoth craft towards your next target.**
TOP RIGHT **Battles take place in space and over land, the game's not-particularly-aerodynamic ships somehow managing to hang in the air regardless of their size.**
MAIN **While ships' movement speed is slow, battles still feel frantic as you manage available power and attempt to out-manoeuvre enemies.**
BELOW LEFT **Yager wants to capture the mix of adventurous spirit and serious topics seen in sci-fi series like Firefly and Battlestar Galactica. Captain personalities and the ability to customise your ships will form the basis of this aspect.**
BELOW RIGHT **You can use the D-pad to direct energy to your ships' various systems. Sending it to the engines will speed you up slightly, while pointing it at the weapons lets you cause more damage. You'll drain power continuously, even if you're not actually using the respective system – unless you switch it all off, anyway**















TOP **Ships bristle with weapons, each of them individually animated. Some weapons can only fire in certain directions, making combat a slow-moving, deadly dance.** ABOVE **While *Dreadnought* will be free to play, Yager is making all the usual noises about how it won't be pay to win. It's hard to shake thoughts of *Dust 514*'s difficulties, though**

While formulating its vision for *Dreadnought*, Yager put together a list of beloved fictional captains to sketch out the game's different ship classes. Jean-Luc Picard encapsulates the spirit of the generalised destroyer class, for example, while the relatively zippy corvette ships evoke the Millennium Falcon and Han Solo. But among this line-up of spacefarers, it's the apparently incongruous inclusion of Marko Ramius – the submarine captain portrayed by Sean Connery in Hunt For The Red October – to represent the sniping artillery class, that best sums up *Dreadnought*'s character.

"We wanted the game to have this naval feel to it – these big ships that take a while to turn," game director **Peter Holzapfel** tells us when we note the absence of a strafe button. "We didn't want the artillery cruisers to be a class where you just strafe in and out of cover – we wanted players to have this feeling of orienting a giant gun towards a target."

***"We wanted the game to have this naval feel to it – these big ships that take a while to turn"***

That sense of piloting an enormous, lumbering ship is present, to varying degrees, in all five classes (corvettes, destroyers and artillery cruisers are joined by the tank-like dreadnoughts and repair-focused tactical cruisers). It's a remarkable sensation: the lack of speed initially makes you feel vulnerable, but your arsenal of mountain-levelling ordnance helps redress the balance as you begin to master switching energy between shields, engines and weaponry, and using entire landmasses as cover. It all takes getting used to, however, and in the context of modern shooters – or even RTS games – the lethargic pace at which the larger ships move is a shock when you first take the helm.

"That was one of the most intense challenges on the creative side," Holzapfel says. "It was like, 'Why has nobody done this before?' And then, 'Oh, because it's not easy to pull off!' [Laughs] But what we've seen is, because most players are so used to faster movement, they initially choose the corvette class. In that, we've created a space where new players can feel at home, and they [are weaker and] require lots of energy management, so you have to get really good. Then, as players get into the game more, they figure out how everything works and begin switching over to the slower classes because there are all these huge ships that do way more damage."

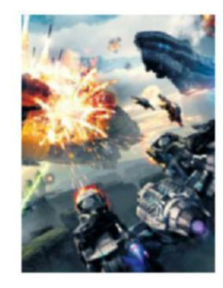
Around 50, in fact, at current count. The game has expanded significantly since we last saw it, taking on a dizzying selection of ship designs, customisable components, and upgrades. Every ship has slots for primary, secondary, internal and perimeter weapons and kit. The primary weapon is defined by the ship's class and can't be changed – within that, however, you might find one artillery craft with 360-degree aiming while another has a narrower aiming range but more firepower – although you can switch out the secondary weapon according to your play style. The internal slot, meanwhile, allows you to tinker with movement speed and weapon power, and perimeter devices provide AOE options such as shields and mines.

**But while the** scope of the fleet has broadened, Yager has also streamlined energy management, piloting and combat systems to prevent flying any of these ships becoming overwhelming, but without sacrificing tactical depth. "With spaceships, it's really easy for designers to go crazy," Holzapfel laughs. "You have a keyboard, you have a spaceship, and it's like, 'Alright then: I have all of these buttons and I'm going to use them!' The more you can do, the more fun it becomes for you as a developer – but that's not necessarily the same for the player. So as a framework we kept controllers in mind. The D-pad has four directions and there are four face buttons, so you naturally limit yourself to four abilities, and we made energy a binary thing where you either assign it to something or you don't. Now it's much easier to control."

Holzapfel is confident the refinements made to *Dreadnought* over the past year represent marked improvements, and from the time we've spent with the PS4 version of the game, we'd be inclined to agree. ■



***Dreadnought* director Peter Holzapfel**



## Black box

While the main focus of *Dreadnought* will be the online 5v5 team matches, Yager is also working on a singleplayer campaign mode that will feature a cast of swarthy space captains. Yager is keeping quiet about the specifics until later in the year, however. There's also a Horde-style mode called Havoc, which is, for the time being at least, exclusive to the PS4 version. The mode pits three players against waves of increasingly daunting enemy fleets, and throws in some boss battles against enormously powerful ships along the way. You'll require a good mixture of classes to prevail, and as the number of enemies increases it becomes essential to fly in formation.



HYPE

# MARVEL VS CAPCOM: INFINITE

## One of the most impenetrable fighting games around shows its friendly side

**Developer/publisher** Capcom
**Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One
**Origin** Japan, US
**Release** September 19

Well, we needn't have worried about complexity. When *Marvel Vs Capcom: Infinite* was announced, we'll admit to being concerned at what the change to a two-on-two structure would do to one of the most varied and flexible fighting games on the market. In *Marvel Vs Capcom 3*, you chose three characters, then an assist – a special move that could be performed by an off-screen teammate – for each of them, from a choice of three. In a game with a huge roster, there were millions of potential team combos. Yet in *Infinite*, motivated by a desire to make a spectacular, but often impenetrable, game more accessible, Capcom has reduced team sizes, and done away with assists. By the end of our first sit down with the game, however, any lingering worries have not so much faded away as been Hyper Comboed into deep space.

When *Infinite* was announced at last year's PlayStation Experience, Capcom made much hay of the Infinity Stones, a handy mechanical MacGuffin borrowed from Marvel lore. You choose your two warriors, and then a stone, which gives each team member an extra move to use in open play, and an Infinity Storm – a powerful, time-limited status buff – when a meter is filled. The Capcom line is that this mechanic does the job of a third character, and while that might be stretching things a bit, the Stones certainly offer something that wasn't available in previous games in the series. Three are available in the build we play, and while we've little chance of understanding their true utility in the space of a couple of hours, the possibilities are already intriguing. An early favourite is the Space Stone, which when fully powered up traps the opponent in a rectangular box for a spell, limiting their moveset as well as their movement.

The Stones are vital, certainly: they give *Infinite* its comeback mechanic, while also adding an extra layer of flexibility to Capcom's pared-back approach to team building. But the character-switch system – now named Shifting – appears, on first inspection, to be the true heart of the game.

Previous *Marvel Vs Capcom* games were quite restrictive in the ways you could tag team members in to and out of the fray. But here you can Shift at almost any time, and the possibilities are dizzying. You can jump, tricking your opponent into blocking high, then tag in a partner and hit them with a low attack. You can fling out a projectile with one character, then Shift, letting you advance close behind, effectively cancelling the fireball's recovery animation. And once you land a few hits, and start tagging in and out, chaining specials, Hyper Combos and Infinity Stone moves, you'll wonder how you ever thought Capcom was going to make a Marvel game ▶





**Capcom producers Michael Evans (top) and Peter Rosas**




We're a little disappointed at *Infinite*'s visuals – we were fond of *Marvel 3*'s cartoon style. Evans points out that the Marvel Cinematic Universe is better known to modern fans than the company's comics




MARVEL VS CAPCOM: INFINITE



Ultron Sigma is the clearest example of how the Capcom and Marvel universes are being connected. One of the stages we play blends Mega Man X and Thor's home cities

that wasn't impossibly deep, incredibly complex, and ridiculously spectacular.

If all that puts you off, however, rest assured that at a low level, this is the most accessible fighting game Capcom has made in years. Attacks are mapped to the face buttons, and simply hammering the light punch button performs an auto combo that includes a flashy aerial string. One of your character's Hyper Combos can be performed by simply pressing the two heavy attack buttons at the same time, while Shifting and Infinity Stone moves are mapped to the shoulders. The result is a game that lets you decide how much you want to engage with the more complex systems: we quickly found that by manually performing a basic ground combo we could save the automatic string until we had an opponent up in the air, extending its duration and raising its damage output. Experimental taps of the Shift button extend our strings further – these are far from optimal combos, certainly, but it does mean that even a novice player can quickly feel powerful, understanding how the basic systems work before putting in the hours in Training mode. This sort of gradual, organic approach to self-improvement might just be the answer for Capcom, a company that has traditionally struggled with tutorials in its fighting games. And given the strength of the licence, producer **Michael Evans** acknowledges, it's more important than ever that Capcom caters for the less-skilled player.

***At a low level, this is the most accessible fighting game Capcom has made in years***

"We want to get the game into the hands of as many players as possible," he tells us. "There'll be a lot of people coming in: maybe Marvel or Capcom fans who've never played the series, or fighting games. We just want to make sure they can jump in and have fun."

**Peter Rosas**, the Capcom producer who got his job in part as a result of his skill on the *Marvel Vs Capcom* tournament scene, agrees despite his hardcore credentials. "We want to make sure this game is accessible and approachable, because it hasn't been historically. It's been entertaining, sure, but hard to get into. This game is a lot easier to approach, a lot easier to digest, and a lot easier to play."



There's a lot more to do in it, too, particularly in the context of Capcom's recent form. It's impossible not to view *Infinite* through the prism of *Street Fighter V*'s botched launch, and given the emphasis Capcom's marketing materials have put on the variety of content that will absolutely, positively, be included on day one, it seems *Infinite*'s maker agrees. Arcade mode, still conspicuous by its absence from *SFV* more than a year after launch, will be there. Mission mode and eightplayer lobbies, with spectator functions for those waiting their turn, will too. Online play should be much improved, since *Infinite* will use platform-holder APIs for matchmaking, rather than *SFV*'s Capcom Fighters Network, which was built to support cross-platform play between PC and PS4, was recently rebuilt from the ground up, and is still considered a work in progress.

**Most importantly for** a game with an eye on Marvel's broad fanbase, a cinematic story mode, penned by Capcom with oversight from Marvel, will also be available on day one. Considered to sit outside the Marvel canon, this is a cross-pollination of *Infinite*'s two component universes – something that's best exemplified by Ultron Sigma, the chief antagonist, a mix of The Avengers' nemesis and a recurring villain in the *Mega Man X* games, that has been created not by Marvel, but Capcom. Evans admits getting a new character design past the Marvel overlords was no easy task ("Man," he says to widespread laughter, "you have no idea") but insists the process has been, if occasionally fraught, nothing but friendly throughout.

"It's been awesome," he says. "We all have opinions. But they know Capcom is an expert at fighting games; they want to allow us to do what we do best. They give us guidance, but we do have leeway. It's not just a Marvel game: it's a crossover game, a Capcom game as well. It's been a great journey: we've gone through that trial by fire and come out the other end high fiving. We have high hopes for this one. We think it's going to do very well." ■

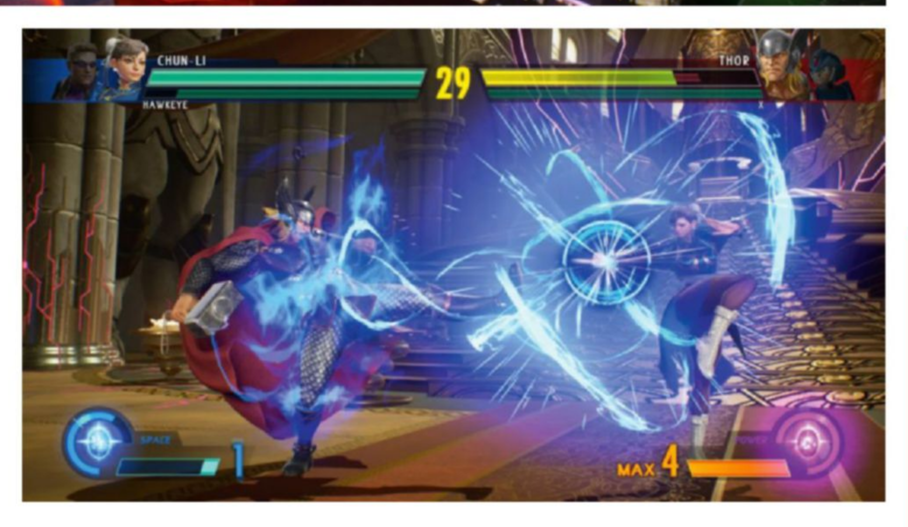


## Infinite combo

Before he was a Capcom producer, Peter Rosas was better known to fighting-game fans as Combofiend. As a tournament player, he was famed for his spectacular comebacks – with one particular *MVC3* victory, playing as *Bionic Commando*'s Spencer, living long in the memory. How does he feel to be part of the team that kills off the very game that got him his job? "It's bittersweet," he says. "As someone who Bionic Armed his way into Capcom, I love the game. But as the game stays out longer and longer, the community gets smaller and smaller. But I know those same guys are going to love *Infinite*. It has the complexities, the strategy, the excitement of a *Versus* game. And now you have a possible influx of new players – a new breed. That's exciting."

TOP **A quick Shift here could save Hulk's bacon, but if it's ill timed Strider could end up hitting both foes at once.** ABOVE **The trade-off to easy inputs is that it limits your moveset. Fancier cinematic Hyper Combos, for instance, must be performed manually.** MAIN **While partnership is key, Capcom has worked to ensure that every character can hold their own when working alone. It's now easier to knock a foe up off the ground to continue a combo, for instance**

TOP **Ultron's laser beams are hard to find a way past, though using the Time Stone for its invincible dash can certainly help counter them.** RIGHT **As before, tapping two buttons while blocking an incoming attack pushes the opponent away and negates chip damage. Now, if you time it perfectly, you can reflect incoming projectiles**







Gollop's small team has achieved a lot in just over a year. "We've got a functioning tactical system, a functioning monster system, and a pretty good AI so far." A rudimentary geoscape, meanwhile, is already up and running

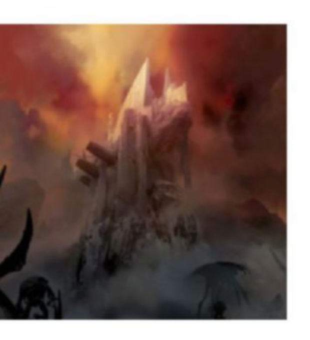
HYPE

# PHOENIX POINT

## Julian Gollop talks tactics as his new strategy takes shape

| | |
|---|---|
| **Developer/publisher** | Snapshot Games |
| **Format** | PC |
| **Origin** | Bulgaria |
| **Release** | 2018 |



By his own admission, *Phoenix Point* was something of a Hail Mary for **Julian Gollop**. Here was an idea with the potential to make or break Snapshot Games, the company he founded to create the kind of games you would want Julian Gollop to create. Reaching its $500k Fig crowdfunding target within a week, this turn-based strategy game is set around 30 years into the future, and projects a nightmarish scenario where an alien virus has fused with Earth creatures, producing a range of eldritch abominations that have displaced humanity at the top of the food chain. Survivors have amassed at the titular settlement, and must band together to fight the extraterrestrial hordes.

Unfortunately for those that remain, these are adaptable foes. Fortunately, that makes them the ideal opposition for a strategy game. The aliens are capable of a range of mutations governed by a procedurally generated system

> ***"There's definitely room for more XCOM-style games in the marketplace"***

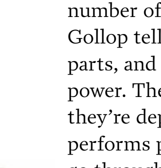
based on a range of variables. "We have a number of chassis types, or archetypes," Gollop tells us, "and there are different body parts, and each may have several levels of power. The way it works for the aliens is if they're deploying a particular model that performs particularly badly in battle, then it'll go through a mutation process to try and evolve some differently functioning limb or appendage, or even a method of mobility, for example. [Its aim] would be to make one of its existing body parts more powerful or more influential. And then it would throw that one back into the battle."

By contrast, if the aliens find an effective mutation, they will attempt to deploy more of that particular unit type – at least until the player has figured out how to beat it. "It's a little bit more sophisticated than that," Gollop says. "There's a certain element of randomness to it: the mutation system itself is quite random. But because the aliens never exactly repeat a particular model, they will tend to get a bit more powerful over time." It's a mechanic, he says, that is "self-balancing", since the aliens won't fix what isn't broken, and will only mutate if they're doing badly. This evolving threat fixes a common genre pitfall: often, growing familiarity with a game's systems leads to a difficulty curve that levels off as you progress. But with an evolving enemy, players won't be able to rest on their laurels. "Or not for very long, at least," Gollop smiles.

**Yet, as in** so many apocalyptic scenarios, your biggest problem might be closer to home. "The most interesting thing about the world of *Phoenix Point* is you're not alone," Gollop elaborates. "There are three other main factions, as well as lots of other isolated human settlements. The initial problem you have as the player, controlling just one cell of an organisation of the Phoenix Project, is that you must somehow persuade, cajole, threaten or negotiate with these other factions and havens in order to pursue your objectives." Your ultimate aim is to unite these disparate groups to find a common solution to the alien problem. There will, Gollop promises, be more than one way to win the game.

This extra strategic layer that sits on top of the tactical combat should, Gollop says, make *Phoenix Point* "more involved than even the first *XCOM*". Talking of the series with which he's most commonly associated, it's clear he's an admirer of Firaxis' recent remakes. "[They] have seriously upped the stakes when it comes to the absolute quality and production values of strategy games in general. You could also argue they've widened the market. They've managed to prove there's a relatively large niche for this kind of game. There's definitely room for more *XCOM*-style games in the marketplace, for sure."

*Phoenix Point*'s crowdfunding figures certainly support that argument. There's still a way to go, and Gollop concedes that the total amount of funds the Fig campaign raises will determine how large and varied the finished game is. But he's bullish about its prospects. "It's a very expandable game system. We'll see how far we get, but at the moment it's already looking very interesting. I'm optimistic that we'll be able to produce something really nice." ■







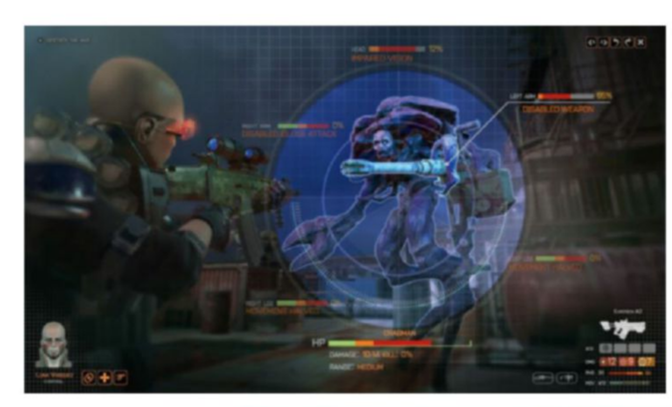


**You can have up to 16 units in your squad – "although you probably wouldn't see such a large battle unless it was a base defence mission," Gollop says**



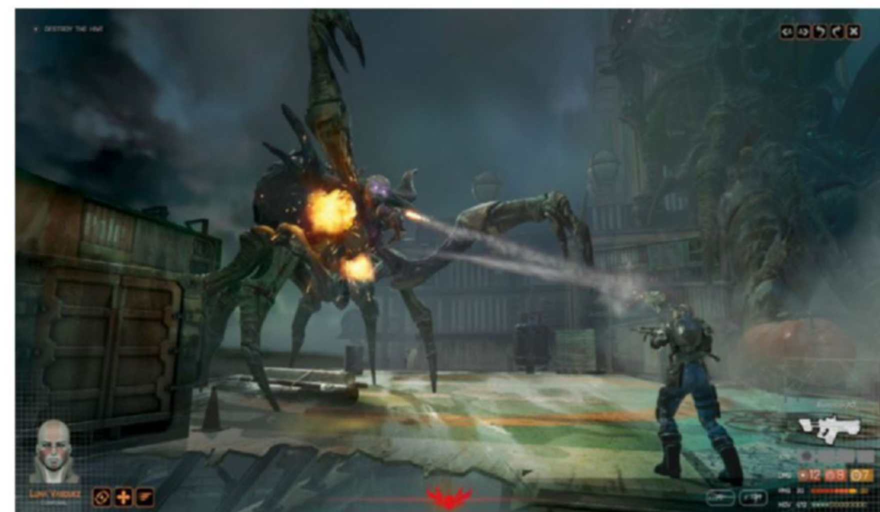
## Steer clearance

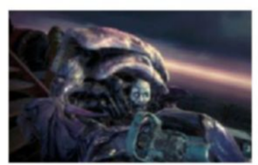
Gollop is keen for *Phoenix Point* to hit its first stretch goal. The target would allow his team to include driveable vehicles, and he's already factoring them into his plans. The immediate advantage of putting squad members in a vehicle is obvious: you'll have extra protection and mobility, for starters. "For certain types of missions, where you have to retrieve or protect civilians, or to escort a VIP of some kind, it's particularly useful," Gollop explains. "Though of course there's always a trade-off because that's what makes strategy games interesting. One downside is you don't get such a large squad, and vehicles obviously can't access the tighter alleys and pathways that human-size [units] can. It's going to add some interesting tactical variety to the missions."





TOP **You'll be able to target individual body parts to reduce an opponent's mobility or to limit their attacking options.**
RIGHT **The aliens emerge from a thick microbial mist, a literal fog of war that spreads beyond the battlefield. You'll need to find ways to destroy it to reveal enemies that hide within – and those that produce the fog itself, too.**
BELOW **Gollop says *Phoenix Point* isn't just aimed at tactical veterans: "It's going to be accessible to people new to the genre"**







TOP **"The game has a slight 4X quality to it," Gollop says, "in the sense that you've got to explore and expand and gain resources and so on. So there's a bit more depth on the strategy side."**
ABOVE **The alien opponents that you fight in regular skirmishes are imposing enough, but on the geoscape you can also see wandering behemoths that need special squads to bring down**











**Developer/ publisher** MercurySteam
**Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One
**Origin** Spain
**Release** December



# RAIDERS OF THE BROKEN PLANET

## MercurySteam puts a cat among the pigeon holes

Like the name of its Madrid-based developer MercurySteam, this genre-fusing 4v1 sci-fi shooter is tricky to pin down. Essentially, four players team up in missions while a rogue fifth interferes. It's got the invasions of *Dark Souls*, the asymmetry of *Evolve*, and the class-based campaign of *Battleborn*. Ambiguity in an oversaturated market is precisely what made publishers wary.

"I invite you to try and convince a publisher they need a shooter," says MercurySteam co-founder **Enric Alvarez**, on the decision to go independent after a fruitful relationship with Konami. "And even more, you can see our track record is not shooter-based. I mean we were coming from seven years working on *Castlevania*, a medieval hack-and-slash... How the hell are you going to be capable of doing a science-fiction shooter that is able to stand alone?"

Perhaps mirroring MercurySteam's desire for autonomy, the story marks a fresh start in a new world: Broken Planet. It is here, 25 light years from Earth, that human mercenaries have travelled to harvest the rare element Aleph, which enables faster-than-light travel and enhances abilities in those who consume it. The natives – your side – don't take kindly to invaders, and so must assemble a team and drive them out.

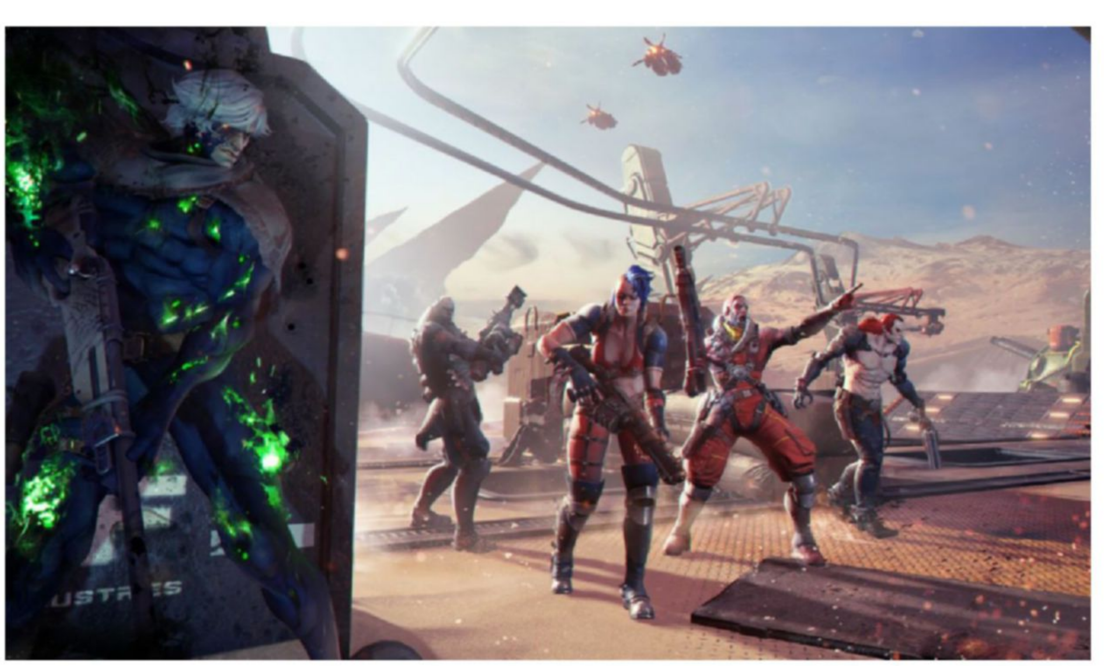
Each self-contained mission sees four player-controlled Raiders battle dozens of AI-controlled foes en route to completing an objective, while a player-controlled Antagonist joins the bots and, well, antagonises. Both Raiders and Antagonist pick from the same pool of characters, which doesn't make much sense from a story perspective. Why is an ally in a previous chapter now trying to kill you? Because a mad

**Harec can teleport to sheer walls and hang off them. But you'll have to keep moving, because Aleph-powered ammo is in short supply, and can only be refuelled by meleeing opponents**

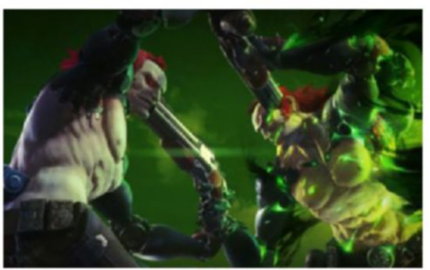




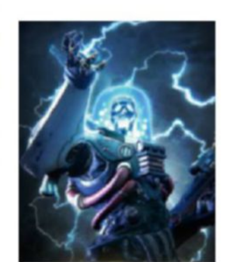
ABOVE **Here's a man who couldn't say no to delicious Aleph. Usually, enemies who kill you will steal your stock and become harder to take down, but this fellow seems to have overindulged.**
LEFT **There's a stress system at work. When your enemies' blood pressure raises, by taking damage or firing weapons, the Aleph in your veins glows, so others see you through solid surfaces**







LEFT **After a mining mishap ripped their planet in half, natives gave up their dependance on the element they once greedily sought. Now humans are here to repeat their mistakes.**
BELOW **You're free to select any character for any stage. You can, for example, enter a rescue mission in which the captive is your own character**



space god is handing out prizes for being devious, apparently.

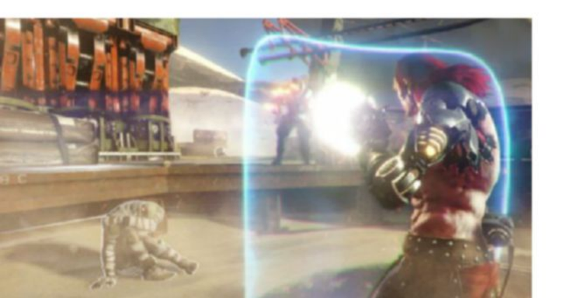
While MercurySteam plays fast and loose with the plot, characters are more concrete, with a bespoke weapon and skill each. Vampiric cowboy Lycus Dion packs a shotgun and shield, for instance, and pilot Hans has a machine gun and jetpack for speedy getaways. We find success with Shea and her lock-on sniper. The longer we target enemies the more damage bullets do, but the more chance they'll escape the crosshair. At one point we hurriedly use her Bewitching skill to render ourselves invisible to a charging opponent and make a narrow escape. You can modify abilities by unlocking cards with in-game currency, too, for faster reloads or reduced melee damage – nothing too transformative.



**Missions test different** play styles. Our first involves shooting the tentacles off a giant mechanical octopus while fending off AI robots and a relentless Antagonist. Bulky Russian Konstantin warms up his minigun and wades in as teleporting long-ranger Harec snipes from his perch. There isn't much interplay between teammates, though. Without any overt healing, buffing, or supporting powers, it sometimes feels like every person for themself. Another involves an arena-based boss fight with a mad scientist who unleashes broad electric attacks and insta-kill grapples. Again, action seems to focus on offense. Friends provide extra firepower, and occasionally offer a distraction, but lack the ability to change a mission's dynamics.



**The game's high difficulty forces players to intelligently use their weapons and skills**



The third mission we try revolves around the rescue of a key Raider from an airship. We go from fighting waves of mercenaries in a two-storey docking area, to manning turrets and blasting encroaching aircraft, to overloading Aleph-filled tanks and triggering an explosion, all while fending off a particularly cunning Antagonist, who sets up ambushing positions and waits for a fresh wave of AI soldiers to spawn before striking.

***"We adapt mechanics to every mission, making every level almost a game mode in itself"***

Character diversity is underwhelming – all of them are basically humanoids with guns – but mission objectives are refreshingly varied.

Alvarez is surprisingly honest about how difficult that was. "It was Hell on Earth. What sets *Raiders* apart from any other comparable game was we took the hard way, in the sense that the mission-driven, narrative-driven thing requires that every mission is different. Every mission has different objectives, different events... We adapt game mechanics to every mission, making every level almost a game mode in itself." Certainly, there are a lot of mechanics at play, and since this is an episodic game, with four campaigns releasing periodically, there will be a lot more to come.

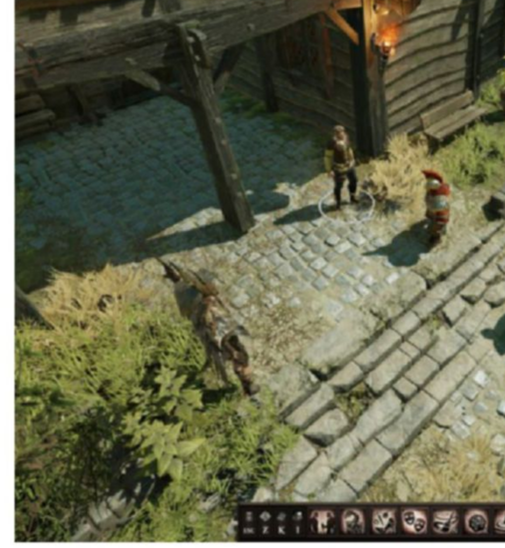
*Raiders Of The Broken Planet* is a risk, then, but for Alvarez, it's one worth taking. "The most enjoyable part of development is to see things happen. It's like when you're painting or sculpting you start with a blank canvas or block, and when you start seeing it, nothing compares to that sensation. The worst part of it is the same thing." ■

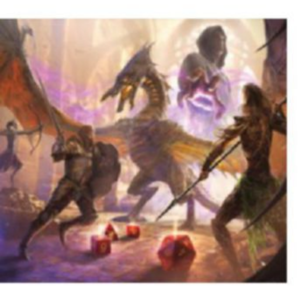
## Planet of attack

Enric Alvarez on competing with the big boys, and the inherent danger of self-funding a project on this scale: "Honestly speaking, there's no way an independent studio like us can afford this, so we had to sit down and think carefully about the whole thing. About the project, about the design, about the financing, about the kind of game we wanted to put on the market, and the real possibilities we had to make it happen. The first thought we had was, 'OK, this has to be a game that directly talks to gamers. We don't want any intermediary faction. We are alone, we are running a risk, let's initiate a dialogue with customers.' The digital distribution which is now possible allows us to do that."

**Developer/ publisher** Larian Studios
**Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One
**Origin** Belgium
**Release** 2017





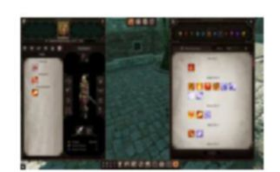
# DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN II

## Rolling D20s and killing Goblins in Game Master mode

*Divinity: Original Sin 2* defies being pigeon-holed. It's a cooperative, story-driven adventure where you can craft your own origin and watch as the world reacts to it. Get into a fight and it becomes a tactical, turn-based RPG where abilities and magic can be combined with the environment. It's elaborate, and systemic, and you can play as a giant lizard who talks to animals. And now it's a platform for creating digital tabletop adventures with you as the Game Master in a new mode exclusive, for the time being at least, to the PC version of the game. "Game Master mode is a tool to control the game and pretty much every aspect of what you're doing," Larian Studios founder **Swen Vincke** tells us. Think of it like a massive toy box packed full of maps, monsters and magical artefacts that can be woven together to create tabletop RPG campaigns.

The mode is something you can dive right into with very little experience. Imagination and the ability to spin a yarn are more important than any other skills. Select a campaign map, pop pins in it to denote important locations, add some flavour text and you've already got a good foundation. From there it's a matter of picking out areas – forests, tombs, inns – that can be filled with objects and characters, and then linking them together with customisable vignettes.

**Simplicity and accessibility** seem to be key. "Very early on we made the decision that we weren't going to put any scripting in it because I think that's a mistake that others have made in the past," Vincke says. "You can't script a campaign and adapt it to anything players come up with. So we gave Game Masters storytelling tools."



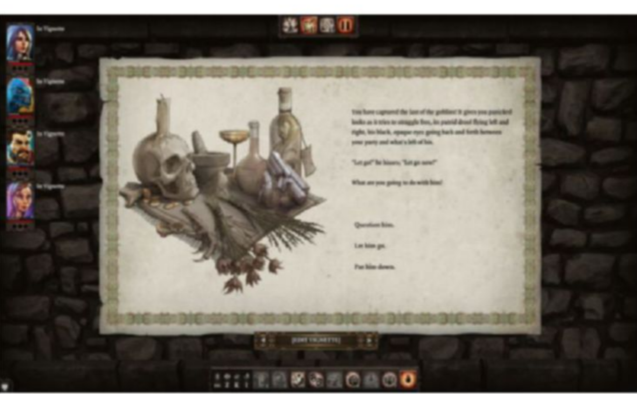


ABOVE **Make your own maps, import them from your favourite games or just use Larian's – there are plenty**




**Giant spiders, green oozes and angry goatmen – the staples of any good Game Master's arsenal**





LEFT **Prepared Game Masters can create vignettes for conversations or scene introductions with custom art and dialogue choices**



## Mod Master

Game Masters won't be able to create new areas from scratch. A separate modding editor will be available, however, containing all the tools that Larian has been using to build *Original Sin 2*, and anything created using the editor can be imported into GM mode. "The Game Master mode is really about storytelling," Vincke says. "You can create your own levels in the editor, but it takes time to set up, so you can't do this on the fly. That's something we isolated from looking at previous Game Master attempts; it was always about giving you full editor functionality, but you actually never had the time to do it."



TOP LEFT **Conversations with NPCs can play out with the Game Master winging it, putting on silly voices on the fly.** ABOVE **Rolling a critical failure can have fatal, often explosive, consequences. Never trust your D20s**

Instead of relying on scripts, GMs have complete control over their campaigns, changing or adding to them on the fly. NPCs can be possessed, players teleported, and objects dropped in at any time. To move the story forward, new vignettes can be put together with Choose Your Own Adventure options while players fight Goblins, or whole new areas can be prepared while the party explores an abandoned mine.

GMs can pause the game at any time, as well, to assist with their creative endeavours. "Pausing is a tool we gave to the Game Master to stay in control," Vincke tells us. "One of the biggest challenges we had was to make sure the GM is in full control because the moment they lose it, it's all over for them."

So when our party decides that we wanted to fling an oil barrel down a well and then drop a flaming Goblin on top of it, Vincke briefly pauses the action so he can make a few changes to the dungeon beneath us, adding smoke and fire, hiding our movements from the beasts dwelling inside the cavernous den. All of this could have gone badly if we'd rolled poorly, which we often do. Our rogue sets fire to a whole forest by stepping on a trap thanks to a critical failure. Curse that D20.

As well as being storytellers, GMs can also play the role of adversary, conjuring up tricky combat encounters and taking direct control of the party's enemies instead of leaving it up to the AI. We watch with dismay as Vincke, chuckling to himself, crafts an arena out of two colliding ships in a storm. He makes a group of mercenaries, picking their magical abilities, and then coats the ships in oil so that one spark will set everything aflame. It doesn't take long for the whole place to start looking a lot like Hell. Thankfully, his sense of fair play takes over, and after a couple of rounds he puts out the fires, reasoning that the heavy rain will be able to douse them.

> *"One of the biggest challenges we had was to make sure the GM is in full control"*

It's moments like this that capture the spirit of tabletop RPGs – the idea that it's not merely about having the tools to destroy players, but also having the tools to create interesting and fun scenarios that feel properly reactive. And it's also handy to be able to turn a particularly cheeky player (we're saying nothing) into a chicken.

While these campaigns are surprisingly easy to put together, and Vincke expects that players will design their own and then share them on the Steam Workshop, there are also plans for predefined campaigns. Even if you don't have the time to craft your own epic adventures, you'll still be able to experience Game Master mode. And judging by what Larian has shown off so far, you'll definitely want to do so. ■

**Game Masters can take full control of enemies in a battle, or just let the AI handle it while they pop out to make a cup of tea**






ROUND-UP

## ANCESTORS: THE HUMANKIND ODYSSEY

**Developer/publisher** Panache Digital Games **Format** TBA **Origin** Canada **Release** TBA



First teased at E3 two years ago, the debut game from early *Assassin's Creed* director Patrice Désilets' new studio has grown in scope, and will no longer be episodic. Set in Africa between ten and two million years ago, it's a thirdperson sandbox survival sim, and though we're not exactly short of those right now, the prehistoric setting might help it stand out. Besides, while there will be some resource management involved, Désilets is adamant that players won't spend too much time dabbling in menus. Cannibalism, however, could be on the table; Désilets and his staff have apparently been debating its inclusion. Heavens.

## CODE VEIN

**Developer** Shift **Publisher** Bandai Namco Entertainment **Format** TBA **Origin** Japan **Release** 2018



With FromSoftware closing the book on the *Souls* series, Bandai Namco has turned to producer Yusuke Tomizawa and the *God Eater* team for a replacement. This anime-style action-RPG sees you explore dungeons alongside an AI-controlled 'buddy' as a vampiric warrior who gains powers by consuming his victims' blood. If the publisher's 'prepare to dine' teaser was an eye-rolling misstep, its apparent eagerness to tout the gruelling difficulty level is more concerning.

## HEY! PIKMIN

**Developer** Arzest **Publisher** Nintendo
**Format** 3DS **Origin** Japan **Release** July 28



This side-scrolling spin-off sees Olimar command his carrot-shaped lackeys to collect seeds and treasure to repair his downed ship. *Yoshi's New Island* might have been a duffer, but perhaps Arzest can do better without having to stay true to a set formula. Then again, we remember *FlingSmash*.

## FINAL FANTASY XII: THE ZODIAC AGE

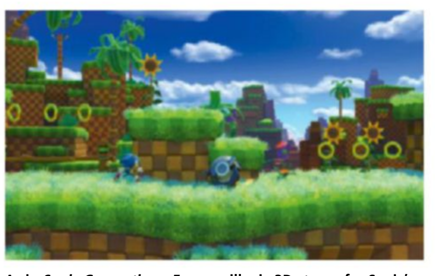
**Developer/publisher** Square Enix
**Format** PS4 **Origin** Japan **Release** July 11



This luxurious remaster of **Edge**'s favourite *FF* is based on the Japanese-only enhanced edition, *International Zodiac Job System*, with a dozen licence boards replacing the original's one, and a host of tweaks to the battle system. Its PS2 origins aren't entirely imperceptible, but it's had a complete facelift.

## SONIC FORCES

**Developer** Sonic Team **Publisher** Sega
**Format** PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Origin** Japan **Release** 2017



As in *Sonic Generations, Forces* will mix 3D stages for Sonic's modern incarnation with side-scrolling courses for his classic form. Sega has offered a glimpse of the latter in a world of lush, grassy platforms, brilliant blue skies and chequerboard patterns. Look, we love Green Hill Zone and all, but *again*?

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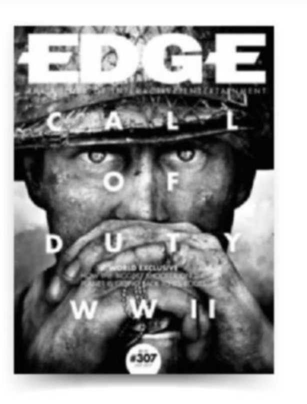




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# #307

VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY





# MAKING HISTORY

How a team of futurists went back in time to make the most intriguing Call Of Duty in years

By Nathan Brown

**Game** *Call Of Duty: WWII*
**Developer** Sledgehammer Games
**Publisher** Activision
**Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One
**Release** November 3

This time, as the saying goes, it's personal. It's the end of our interview, and **Glen Schofield**, studio head at Sledgehammer Games, has asked us to wait while he gets something from his office. He re-emerges with a picture frame: inside are the medals his grandfather received for his service in World War II. There are medals for each of the theatres in which he served; there are Bronze and Silver Stars, and a Purple Heart. In the centre of the frame is a picture of one being pinned to his uniform by a commanding officer. It's taken from a distance, and side-on – an unusual angle, Schofield says, but not for this CO, who insisted on being shot from his best side.

This is *Call Of Duty: World War II* in microcosm. Schofield and his fellow Sledgehammer studio head **Michael Condrey** made their name as futurists: from the alien horrors of *Dead Space* to the boost-jumping exoskeletons of *Call Of Duty: Advanced Warfare*, the pair have spent the past decade sketching futuristic universes into existence from scratch. Now, they're returning to the past, to the conflict on which *Call Of Duty*'s reputation was formed. It's a process that has turned them from futurists into historians; it is a job that has involved a couple of years of meticulous research of one of the most bloody conflicts in history. But there is also an emotional connection, a personal one, a family one – something felt not just by Schofield, but by most of the studio, and many of the game's likely players.

With that comes, appropriately enough, a sense of duty: to make not just a blockbuster videogame, but to do so while showing the appropriate respect and reverence for the subject matter and the people who were affected by it. An even greater necessity than usual to get it right. This is not exactly the sort of thing Schofield and Condrey had to think of when they were coming up with cool ways to shoot the limbs off aliens in *Dead Space*, or dreaming up funky types of tactical grenade for use in *Advanced Warfare*.

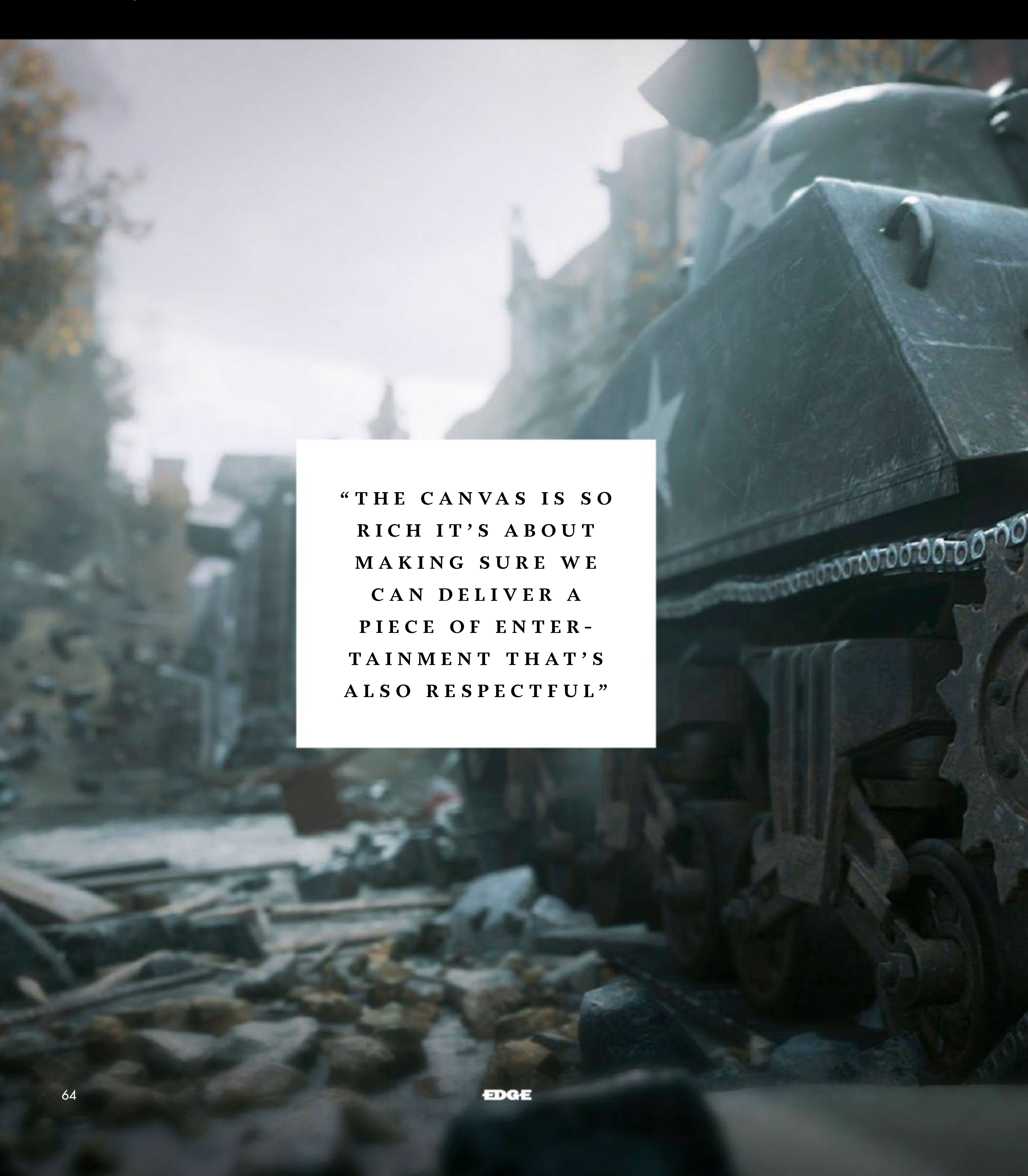
"In the games we've made previously, the challenge was to really get the players invested emotionally in these things that weren't ▶

**Almost everyone on the dev team has a personal link to the conflict. Sledgehammer plans to pay tribute to staff members' relatives who fought in the war in the end credits of the campaign**





World War II may offer a fixed set of weapons and vehicles, but finding new ways to use them poses a stern challenge. Schofield recalls poring over technical data looking for unknown weak points in tank treads



"THE CANVAS IS SO RICH IT'S ABOUT MAKING SURE WE CAN DELIVER A PIECE OF ENTERTAINMENT THAT'S ALSO RESPECTFUL"



real," Condrey says. "The conflicts, the characters, the technology – you had to work really hard to get people to relate to them and believe in them, because they were made up. For this game, with the wealth of reality that we have before us, the canvas is so rich it's about making sure we can deliver a piece of entertainment that's also respectful and authentic. It's almost the opposite problem."

It has required the opposite solution, too. During the making of *Advanced Warfare*, Schofield and Sledgehammer sought out professional futurists to help them understand what technology would look like 50 years in the future. Here, they enlisted the services of Marty Morgan, a World War II historian, who has interviewed over 2,000 veterans and civilians affected by the conflict, and these days spends six months of the year giving historical tours around continental Europe. He was Sledgehammer's guide as Schofield and Condrey trod in the footsteps of the soldiers whose story they intend to tell through the prism of a blockbuster *Call Of Duty* campaign. They went out there looking for details, certainly; for the feel and heft of WWII weaponry, for instance, the handling model of a half-track vehicle, or simply to take pictures on location, since photogrammetry is a key technique in the development of the game.

Yet there was more to it than that. "We went out there not just because we wanted to go and scan everything," Schofield says, "but because we wanted to get a sense of, 'What does it feel like to be in Normandy or Aachen at ten below with snow coming down?'"

"There's this theory of how the brain works," Condrey adds. "You're wired to pattern match; you're wired to build a model around things that you're familiar with. The best example is if you were to paint a lake. You're going to paint it blue, right? That's generally wrong – most lakes aren't blue. If you look through a pinhole at the water in a lake you'll realise it's maybe blue-green, or grey, or green-grey." By visiting, in turn, every location that would feature in *Call Of Duty: World War II*'s campaign, Condrey and Sledgehammer were giving themselves that pinhole view. Condrey recalls standing in the Hürtgen forest in the driven snow, when both he and Schofield spotted that the ground underfoot wasn't pure white: it was studded with pine needles. "It may seem like a tiny thing, but it's an example of that pinhole- ▶

like view of what it looked like when, in 1944, terribly unprepared, in canvas winter clothes, these soldiers were holding the line. These foxholes are ten feet from the road. They were defending against a ten-mile convoy of German tanks. You'll never get that from reading a book."

And while the conflict may be more than 70 years in the past, World War II's mark on these areas remains. Schofield found a roll of barbed wire hanging from a tree; trails of communication wire were still in place; a gigantic King Tiger Tank remains to this day in the middle of a battlefield, too heavy for trucks to remove. Days before the pair arrived in Hürtgen, the body of an American soldier was found under ten feet of earth. An estimated 200 more are still buried there. Schofield recalls being humbled by Belgian monuments to allied soldiers; by the end of a tour of a concentration camp, Condrey remembers being so overcome with anger that he wanted to punch someone. The pair went to Europe on a research trip. They came back with something very different: an understanding that telling a story set in World War II is about much more than accurately replicating some of the conflict's famous battles. "We didn't think it would be as dense with history as it was," Schofield says. They just had to look through a pinhole.

**The result is** a game that bears all the hallmarks of Sledgehammer's painstaking research, certainly. Locations, weapons, vehicles and objects are brought to meticulously accurate life through photogrammetry and authentic modelling. Allied and enemy forces move realistically in battle thanks to the input of Morgan, the hired historian, who stayed up into the small hours the night before our visit to write a memo explaining why a proposed bomber formation simply wouldn't have happened in World War II. Yet *COD: WWII* also seeks to capture the humbling reverence that Condrey and Schofield felt out on tour across the Western Front. And it aims to reflect the deep bond that formed between soldiers – not the tier-one super-soldiers of recent *Call Of Duty*s, but young men who'd never held a rifle – who, put in such dire situations, managed to find the resolve to carry on.

That's no small task for a game whose story, for all its intended emotional complexity, must nonetheless fit into the breakneck-paced confines of a *COD* campaign. To meet that demand, Sledgehammer has tripled the size of its narrative team. It has significantly improved the striking performance-capture techniques that put Kevin Spacey in *Advanced Warfare*: now the process involves scanning more points of contact, capturing a wider range of emotions, greatly overhauling skin-shader systems and blending everything together more believably than before. It has also meant spending a lot longer in the capture studio – something Schofield believes is key to getting the cast to properly play the roles required of them. "The ensemble cast has been working together for over a year," he says. "We were casting for about six months, and I felt like we got it right. But a year later they're really acting like a platoon. They're talking over each other, there's real emotion – it's not like they're acting all the time." The difference is such that Sledgehammer intends to return to parts of the script recorded earlier in development, and have the cast perform them again.

The story will tell of Ronald 'Red' Daniels, played by Transformers star Josh Duhamel, and his platoon, beginning at the D-Day landings and pushing onwards through the Western Front. In another personal touch, the main protagonist gets his nickname from Schofield's father, who died during the game's development; the nickname was bestowed on Schofield Sr by his Purple Heart-winning dad. As tradition dictates, perspective shifts will let you occasionally see the conflict through another faction's eyes, including a stint in control of the female leader of the French Resistance. Familiar stuff, perhaps, but Sledgehammer's intent is that players will feel the deep bond between Daniels and his band of brothers, and find the overall arc of the narrative more emotionally affecting than the traditional whizz-bang of a *COD* campaign.

Where this game might have the edge on its stablemates in that regard is in a commitment to story that goes far beyond the cast of characters and the battles in which they fight. "There are little things," Schofield says. "Let's say you're running through a house. In the old days we'd put a certain number of pictures on the wall; we'd have a kitchen table and plates. Well, no more. Now, we're like, 'Who lived here, and for how long? Why's there just one dinner plate and a loaf of bread?' We asked for stories, for *everything*. Everybody in the team now knows, 'I'd ▶

We get a quick glimpse of the game's version of the battle of Hürtgen forest. While scripted, it looks marvellous





Sledgehammer founders and studio heads Glen Schofield (top) and Michael Condrey

## ALLIED FORCES

During our visit to the studio, someone's taken a literal sledgehammer to the company's HQ; it has staffed up from *Advanced Warfare*'s 200-strong development team to over 300, and that growth has seen the studio expand to a second floor, with extensive remodelling work underway. That's quite the challenge for Schofield and Condrey, who founded Sledgehammer on the belief that a studio should feel like a family. "About the point where you grow past 150, it changes things," Condrey says. "The core group we started with eight years ago, we intimately knew each other and there was a shorthand in our development process. Now at 300 it's about making sure the values and ideas are cascading." Schofield adds: "The more time you spend in business, the more you realise communication's everything. Mankind can build anything, but if we can't communicate, we're not going to build shit."

Schofield discovered that tank commanders would modify their vehicles – fortifying the side or front – to suit their preferred tactics



"A YEAR LATER THEY'RE ACTING LIKE A PLATOON. THEY'RE TALKING OVER EACH OTHER, THERE'S REAL EMOTION"



"EVERYBODY IN THE TEAM NOW KNOWS, 'I'D BETTER HAVE A STORY FOR WHAT I'M WORKING ON. IT'S GOT TO FIT'"

Concept art shows a guiding principle for COD: WWII's visual style, which seeks to acknowledge that beauty exists in the darkest corners



WWII historian Marty Morgan played a vital role in steering the drive for authenticity

## WAR WOUNDS

Part of the reason for historian Marty Morgan being such a stickler for the details when assisting Sledgehammer's teams is that he spends a lot of his time on tour correcting popular misunderstandings. "Saving Private Ryan increased the amount of work I do leading tours in Normandy, but I spend almost as much time talking about it, and Band Of Brothers, as I do the things that actually happened." Top of the list is the movie's opening scene, which shows the lowest ebb of the D-Day landings on Omaha Beach – which, in reality, lasted for barely an hour of a day-long battle. "Saving Private Ryan has left this lingering impression that the battle of Omaha Beach was one big long slaughter from start to finish; that US troops were in exposed positions for hours upon hours being killed by enemy fire. But it's not what happened." Morgan also regularly disappoints tourists who ask when they're visiting Ramelle, the French town that plays host to the film's final battle. It doesn't exist.

Concept art of Marigny, where German forces made their final stand after the Battle Of St-Lô. These days it's a cemetery for over 11,000 fallen German soldiers

better have a story for what I'm working on. It's got to fit.' Then, everybody starts to direct themselves. And that allows us, knowing they've already gone that deep, to know that we can go even deeper."

Such environmental storytelling will also feature in the multiplayer component, which in addition to revisiting battlefields featured in the singleplayer campaign will also expand to different fronts. A stop on Condrey and Schofield's research trip informed one such multiplayer map, but with the mode's finer details being held back for E3 – and a beady-eyed Activision rep sat in the interview room – specifics elude us. Yet we do manage to get some information on our biggest concern with the game's multiplayer. With every passing year, our reflexes grow slower, and *Call Of Duty*'s multiplayer seems to get faster. Given the recent dip in sales figures, we assume we're not alone in feeling that *COD* multiplayer is no longer made for us. Does the return to original series values, and the heavier, slower weaponry of World War II, mean that Sledgehammer will slow the pace of the multiplayer component?

"It's the fast-action experience you're used to, and gritty and visceral," Condrey says, briefly falling back on the marketing materials while he works out what he really wants to say. "But certainly, the boosts and thrusts and abilities that we introduced in *Advanced Warfare* and you've seen in other games that are around… future technology and exoskeletons are just not appropriate for this game. You can imagine trying to find a balance where it feels strategic and appropriate to the time period, while still maintaining the fun of multiplayer. It's more grounded, and more strategic, and I think you'll find it's not as fast."

It will also feel a lot more manageable than in recent *Call Of Duty* games, whose expanded movesets required expansive map designs, and so made it frequently feel impossible to cover all the possible angles of attack. "The feeling of being able to identify your lanes and threats is so different when you're grounded," Condrey says. "We spent a lot of time on map design, and there's a lot of fundamental rules about sightlines and engagements. But it's transformational when you [no longer] have to worry about an unseen threat from the sky." The return to grounded, more readable combat, and to such an iconic setting, should in theory mean ▶









Photos of Condrey and Schofield's research trip, which has informed every part of the game – even the Zombies mode. "There's some really authentic stuff in there," Schofield insists. "There's back story that's based on real events." Condrey, intriguingly, says the mode will be "unique to our *Dead Space* signature"

**Josh Duhamel is best known as Lennox in Michael Bay's Transformers films, but he has previous with Activision too. He voices a character in *Skylanders: Superchargers***

"YOU CAN IMAGINE TRYING TO FIND A BALANCE WHERE IT FEELS STRATEGIC AND APPROPRIATE TO THE TIME PERIOD"

this year's *Call Of Duty* has a wider appeal than the futuristic flights of fancy that we've seen in recent years. Yet it also exposes a tension that lies at the heart of making a new game in such a popular series. There is a large, passionate base of players who commit hundreds of hours to the game every year, and to whom a developer must naturally cater. Yet *COD* is, despite its recent slide, still one of the best-selling series on the planet; there is a wider audience to contend with, too. How do you make a *Call Of Duty* game for people who like *Call Of Duty* the way it is, while still appealing to everyone else?

"It's a fun and interesting challenge," Condrey says. "How do you innovate, but not alienate? How do you address the needs of the core, while also understanding that there are guys like us, who've been playing games for 20 years? Or who are 20 years old themselves, and just coming in? I find that really fascinating in the studio because we have developers here who are in their mid-40s, who've been hardcore gamers for 25 years, and then we have millennials, who come in with a new perspective, on social interactions and the things they're looking for in their games."

Schofield cuts in. "There's an easy answer, and it's one word: quality. If you make a quality game, you can get people from all ages, because they'll talk about it. Having won Action Game Of The Year [at the DICE Awards – for *Dead Space*, made when Condrey and Schofield were at Visceral Games, and *Modern Warfare 3*, which Sledgehammer co-developed] we know what the bar is, so we push ourselves at it. That's the easiest answer, and the hardest thing to do."

**It is also** critical. Not only for Activision, which in its recent financials admitted that sales of 2016's *Infinite Warfare* had been disappointing. Nor just for Sledgehammer, which naturally wants to see its hard work pay off. For Morgan, the historian whose work on this game has been so thorough and insistent that he jokes about there being a dartboard somewhere in the studio with his picture over the bullseye, *Call Of Duty: World War II* has a much more vital role to play.

"I worry that [World War II] is being pushed into the realm of superficiality," he says. "The living memory of this conflict is receding very quickly. Just this past week, three veterans that I've interviewed have died, and that happens every week." He recalls a recent historical tour of Germany with a family whose father was keenly interested in WWII. On the final day, on the drive back from Berlin to the airport, the family's 16-year-old son asked Morgan what the wall he'd been talking about so much was about. "By the time we got to the airport I thought, 'Wow, I just explained the Cold War in a cab ride.' It reoriented me in my understanding, and became a cautionary tale to myself – there are going to be more and more young people who, through no fault of their own, are just not familiar with the subject. My grandfather fought in the war. I had a great uncle who was at Pearl Harbor. I was around the war, and veterans, for most of my life.

"And now we're bringing the subject matter to a very large audience of people who have no living memory of the war. They can't remember an elderly grandfather who fought in it. There's no context aside from what they might learn about it, and public education in the US just sort of abdicates responsibility for the subject. I've written two books; nobody read 'em. We're living in a world where people read less and less. What's going to replace it? Projects like this, that have strong emotional themes, and also strong educational themes."

It's easy – and often tempting – to be cynical about a new *Call Of Duty*. Activision and the studios that make it are damned whether they do or don't. Seek to innovate on the formula by moving the action into the future, experimenting with movement and weapon sets, and they are accused of abandoning the series' values; go back to the past and they are deemed to have run out of ideas. Yet we end our visit to Sledgehammer with little to be cynical about. When a man like Morgan, who has devoted his entire career to a subject that is now literally dying, describes this game as the best history textbook ever made – we had, to be fair, just asked if it was the most expensive one – you can't help but take his point.

"I'm not saying that because I've become a Sledgehammer Games zombie who just spouts off propaganda," he says. "I say it because one thing we already definitely know is that this is going to be big. Band Of Brothers was released in 2001; Saving Private Ryan was released 20 years ago. There was no social-media universe back then, and now there is. I have this looming sense that this is going to be big. It may be the biggest thing that has ever happened for this subject." ■

Team members fired, reloaded and recorded WWII-era weapons in a bid to be as authentic as possible, though we expect the final products to be a little more forgiving than they were 70 years ago

## HISTORY LESSON

*COD: WWII* has escaped the vitriol that met last year's *Infinite Warfare* announcement, but Sledgehammer has taken some ludicrous fire from those who claim *COD*'s return to WWII was only sanctioned after Activision saw EA's success with *Battlefield 1*. Rather, Schofield and Condrey see it as part of a wider cultural shift – pointing to films such as Fury, Hacksaw Ridge and Christopher Nolan's forthcoming Dunkirk as evidence. After all, the same happened during production of *Advanced Warfare* with movies like Elysium, Edge Of Tomorrow and Oblivion. For the avoidance of any doubt, the team began work on *COD: WWII* two-and-a-half years ago. "We put up with the same thing on every game – 'Oh, you copied so and so,'" Schofield says. "It's ridiculous." As for the suggestion that Activision, not the developer, mandates the kind of game that will be made? Schofield insists that such decisions are made in consultation. "Activision always says, 'We need teams to be passionate about what they're doing.' They keep saying that, and it's the right way to do it."

In keeping with the theme of camaraderie, a new social space, Headquarters, will also feature. Seemingly modelled on *Destiny*, it suggests that more complex co-op action than we typically expect from *COD* may be in the offing



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# Tablet games®

How videogames became a weapon in the fight against childhood cancer

By Asi Burak and Laura Parker



A young nurse stood on a chair in the waiting room of the Lucile Packard Children's Hospital at Stanford University, California, on an overcast Thursday morning in late October 2015. She was hanging Halloween decorations from the ceiling. Cotton spiderwebs framed two large windows overlooking an interior courtyard. Shiny black witch's hats stood at attention on tiny, pastel-coloured tables. Pumpkin-shaped string lights looped around furniture corners and light fixtures. On the wall, below the permanent posters of Marvel superheroes and Star Wars characters, someone had stuck a life-size laughing skeleton.

A four-year-old girl with wiry blonde hair sat patiently on the waiting room couch, a multicoloured surgical mask over her mouth. **Jacob Lore**, a recreation therapist, walked in holding a large folder and two iPads. The girl waved him over. "Hello," she said, standing up to greet him and putting one of her tiny hands on his hairy forearm. "Hey Maya," Lore said, sitting down next to her and offering her one of the iPads. "Want to play a game?"

Maya reached out for the iPad and, without another look at Lore, began playing a chaotic-looking firstperson shooter. A swarm of grotesque-looking creatures descended from the top and sides of the screen; Maya deftly tapped the screen in various places, deploying different powers to disperse them. "Wow, Maya, you're doing really great," Lore said encouragingly. Maya ignored him. "What level are you on?" Lore tried again. "Eight," she said, and kept playing. Lore looked amused. "Once they start playing, there's no getting anything more out of them."

As a child life specialist in the hospital's oncology ward, Lore's job is to help young patients – who range from infants to late 20-somethings – adjust to hospitalisation. This means constantly talking to patients about their diagnosis and treatment in a language they understand, and creating an environment in which they feel safe. Lore likes to be present when younger patients like Maya undergo a procedure like getting an IV drip put in – he'll often sit beside them, asking them questions or showing them pictures or videos to distract them. The hospital's playroom – a brightly lit classroom space with toys, an art corner, a small kitchen, and a recreation room with televisions, videogame consoles and iPads – is a designated "safe space", meaning doctors and nurses can come in and talk to the kids, but they cannot administer medicine or discuss treatment while inside. There's no talk of chemotherapy or checkups. "This is ▶

the one space they can come in to play without having to worry about someone coming in and saying or doing something that scares them," Lore said.

Before the iPad, Lore used to use a felt board to teach younger patients about things like chemotherapy and red cells and white blood cells. "But when things like iPads came along, I was having real trouble pulling them away from the screen to get them to look at a felt board," he said. In 2008, Lore was approached by a paediatric oncologist named Gary Dahl about a videogame Dahl was helping develop with the aim of informing young cancer patients about diagnosis and treatment. The game was a thirdperson shooter in which players pilot a microscopic robot named Roxxi through the bodies of fictional cancer patients, blasting away cancer cells. It was slow to load and required several disks (the first version of the game was released in 2006), but Lore noticed it essentially fulfilled the same function as his felt board.

This was the game Maya was playing; at least, a newer version of it: shorter, quicker, and available on mobile and tablets. After another ten minutes, she logged out of the game, and began running her small finger across the iPad screen, searching for something else. "What are you looking for?" Lore asked. "*Angry Birds*," she replied. Lore sighed. "I'm always losing out to *Angry Birds*."

**The *Re-Mission* games** were developed by HopeLab, a private nonprofit based in Redwood City, California. The company was founded in 2001 by **Pam Omidyar** and her husband, Ebay founder Pierre Omidyar, to develop apps and games that improve the health of young people. The original *Re-Mission* was the lab's first game, made in the hope of encouraging young cancer patients to get more involved in their treatment by targeting specific psychological and behavioural outcomes, like motivation and self-efficacy. It's not just the grim environment of hospitals that can negatively impact a young person's ability to follow treatment: it's hard for young patients to remember to take their medicine full stop. Regular habits and consistency is not something they are overly familiar with. Pam Omidyar believed that helping young cancer patients visualise their body's response to cancer might help motivate them to take a more active role in treatment. If they could just see how hard their body was working to repel the cancer, they'd be compelled to give it their all.

It was 1989. Pam Omidyar was a 22-year-old college graduate working as a research assistant in an immunology lab at Stanford University. She'd moved to California to be with her boyfriend, Pierre, who worked as a computer scientist. At the lab, her job was to grow different cancer cell lines so that the scientists could experiment on them. Sometimes, she assisted them, but her main job was to keep these cell cultures healthy. She spent her days staring down the barrel of a microscope, watching T-cells battle cancer cells.

"The idea was to find cell-specific markers, markers on the surface of cancer cells that cytotoxic T-cells could attack and kill in a very specific way," she said recently. At night, her and Pierre would play videogames on their Sega Genesis. On the weekends, they'd go hiking or mountain biking.

The professor Omidyar worked for was a paediatric oncologist. Gradually, she began thinking about the kids whose cancer cell lines she was growing. "She could see this epic struggle taking place in the body of cancer patients, but she knew that cancer patients didn't feel like there was that much of an epic struggle," **Steve Cole**, HopeLab's VP of research and development, said recently. We were sitting in a small, functional boardroom inside HopeLab's modest offices in Redwood City. Omidyar declined to attend – she preferred to talk via email.

One day, Omidyar pictured her job in the form of a videogame. She was the protagonist, tracking down cancer cells and attacking them with T-cells from a cool-looking laser gun. What if there was a game that utilised the same principles, but funneled them into something that really mattered, like a young patient's attitude to fighting cancer? "She put those two things together and said, 'You know, if I can just show people cancer in the context of a game where they can battle it, then they are going to feel different about it,'" Cole said.

But videogames cost millions of dollars and hundreds of people to make, and Omidyar had no idea where to even begin looking for those kinds of resources. She dropped the idea. Then, in 1995, Ebay launched. Suddenly, Pam Omidyar had everything she needed.

On a sunny afternoon in the fall of 1999, Omidyar wandered into Stanford's development office and asked whom she could speak to about making a videogame about cancer. She was shown to Gary Dahl's door, the paediatric oncologist. Dahl immediately agreed to help and sent her to **Pamela Kato**, a Stanford health psychologist who shared Omidyar's love for videogames. Kato was wrapping up a postdoc at Stanford in paediatric oncology. "I remember Gary coming to me and saying, 'There's this lady that made a lot of money in Silicon Valley and she wants to make something for kids with cancer,'" Kato said recently. "And I said, 'OK, Gary, does she just want to give the kids a toy to make them feel better, or does she want to do this right?'"

Dahl told Kato to shut up and just go to the meeting. Kato was immediately taken with Omidyar's sincerity. "I've seen people waste money trying to help kids but they don't know what they're doing," she said. Dahl told Omidyar, "This may be the first time I'll be able to offer my kids a sense of control over their disease."

Initially, Kato worked as a consultant, writing proposals on how a game about cancer would look, how it would play, and whom it would benefit. She made contacts with game designers and publishers. "The game wasn't intended to be clinical – it wasn't a new form of chemotherapy – but we believed it could help kids while they were going through this challenging part of their lives," Omidyar said. She didn't have an office; her and Kato met in coffee shops to give each other updates.

While Omidyar and Kato tried to come up with an actual methodology for developing the game, Dahl, a hard-nosed medic, warned them the chances of success were slim: "There's not a lot of evidence that this is going to actually work," Cole remembered Dahl saying. "But I can tell you one thing: if your game can help my kids take their maintenance chemotherapy more reliably, or help them report symptoms at an earlier stage, that will make a huge difference." Dahl knew that young cancer patients died much too often, precisely for those reasons. If there was some way to help them remember to take their treatments, or motivate them to become more active and interested in their recovery, it could translate to an increase in survival rates.

That's when Kato called an old grad school friend named Steve Cole, who was working as a professor of medicine at UCLA Cancer Center. "Steve, you're the only person I know who knows the backstory of the cells who can also speak the language of videogames," she told him. "Help me turn this into a game." Cole agreed and came onboard as a consultant.

The problem now was the game itself. Because its primary function was not entertainment, it would require different design and production parameters to make. No one seemed to know where to turn next. Omidyar reached out to major game developers "at the level of EA, Microsoft and Nintendo", although she did not wish to name them. But no one was interested in taking things further. "In a business context, they couldn't justify the expense of creating a game for a small segment of the population," Omidyar said. "They didn't have the imagination to see how we could make a game about cancer cool and beautiful."

Omidyar and Kato knew they needed videogame designers, but it was difficult to find any willing to work alongside physicians. Physicians didn't understand the process of game design, and game designers didn't always want to include the clinically relevant information that Omidyar thought was important to achieve the game's purpose. "Game designers are fabulous at motivating kids to keep playing a game, and that's what we wanted – we wanted a game that kept kids playing by using the incentives and challenges that make games so engaging. But we also needed to put content into the game that would make it relevant to the cancer experience and help kids better understand their disease and how to fight it," Omidyar said.

Adherence to medication is crucial in cancer treatment. Ideally, the game would help young cancer patients to understand the correlation between the amount of chemo in their body and the ability of cancer cells to replicate the moment they stopped chemo. Omidyar and Kato would sit around coffee shops in Mountain View trying to imagine what such a game would look like. They thought it would work best set in the bloodstream. "What would it look like to actually navigate through the bloodstream in the heart? You'd have to wait for the valve to open, and you'd shoot through," Omidyar said. "Then you'd get stuck, and you don't want to damage ▶

# "They couldn't justify the expense. They didn't have the imagination to see how we could make a game about cancer cool and beautiful"




**This is an extract from Power Play: How Video Games Can Change The World. It's available now in hardcover from bit.ly/pplaybook**

# "You really have to work hard to make a video game impacts on someone's behavior – it's not actually an easy thing to do, in our experience"



Laura Parker is an author and journalist for The New Yorker and The New York Times

the heart, so you have to hold firing and get to the next location. We talked through all that."

There was also the issue of videogames' public image. At the time, games were more or less seen as the "enemy of civilisation", as Cole remembered. Games had been blamed for the Columbine High School shooting in 1999. Two years later, Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto III* generated heated debate about the nature of violence and sexual content in games. There were claims the game glorified, even encouraged, criminal behaviour. Violent games became the subject of frequent media reports. On 25 June 2003, teenagers William and Josh Buckner shot and killed Aaron Hamel and Kimberly Bede.

They claimed they were inspired by *GTAIII*. In October the same year, Hamel and Bede's families filed a $246 million lawsuit against Rockstar Games and the companies associated with distributing the game. US senators began referencing studies on violent games and aggression. (There remains no definite link between the two. Some studies argue that videogames have a negative impact on the behaviour of young adults, however, in some cases, these conclusions were drawn from isolated incidents involving randomly chosen participants showing mild signs of aggression and anti-social behaviour immediately after playing a violent videogame – things like cutting off the person in front of them while walking out of the study, or not saying "please" or "thank you".)

According to Cole, these studies were often correct about the potential of interactivity to influence behaviour – but incorrect about how that potential is realised. "Most videogames are not very impactful, either positively or negatively. You really have to work hard to make a videogame impact on someone's behaviour – it's not actually an easy thing to do, in our experience. So I think the generalisation that games routinely do this stuff is wrong."

Omidyar used the debate about violent games to her advantage: if some people worried that games had the power to motivate bad behaviour, the best thing she could do was use the same argument to show games could motivate good behaviour. In 2001, she set up her own company, HopeLab. She reached out to physicians, patients and their families to get insight and data into the struggles faced by young cancer patients. Then, she turned to the question of development and distribution. Should the studio work with outside developers, or hire a team in-house to design the game?

After testing out several game concepts on young cancer patients at Lucile Packard Children's Hospital, HopeLab finally settled on a final design from an LA-based game design studio called Real Time Associates. The first version of *Re-Mission* was completed in 2005, but Omidyar wanted one more assurance that she was on the right track before releasing the game. Specifically, she wanted the support, and respect, of the medical community. So, in mid-2005, she assembled a large, randomised controlled trial of *Re-Mission*. This is a trial in which participants are allocated at random to receive one of three

things: the clinical intervention (a drug or in this case, a videogame) being tested; a placebo; and no intervention at all. "A randomised controlled trial was, and still is, the gold standard for testing," Cole said.

Cole began the "gargantuan struggle" of wrangling a team of 34 different medical centres across the US, Canada and Australia, each recruiting teenage cancer patients. The population of adolescent and young adults with cancer is relatively small, meaning in order to get the sample size needed for a randomised clinical trial, HopeLab needed to recruit from a large sample size. The final number of patients – 374 – seems small, yet it made the study one of the first and largest to focus on adolescent cancer patients. HopeLab managed to secure funding for the trial from The National Cancer Institute, who told Omidyar she was crazy for trying to do the whole thing in a year. It would take at least five, they said.

During the study, patients were asked to play *Re-Mission* as much as they wanted to, with the stipulation that they play at least once a day. At Stanford, Dahl approached Lore to help him recruit patients. "It took a while for some of the younger patients to get it, but a lot of the older kids responded to it," Lore said. "The point was to teach them about their treatment – so, for example, yes, the chemo makes you feel bad, but at the same time, this is why we need to do it. This is why you lose your hair."

In the end, the study was completed in under a year, like Omidyar wanted. What's more, it proved her assertions about the game were correct. The control group received PCs preloaded with a popular videogame; the rest of the participants received PCs with the same popular videogame, plus a copy of *Re-Mission*. It was Kato's belief that the kids who played *Re-Mission* would be less hesitant about their cancer treatment, and overall show more willingness to get better. After three months, the research team found the patients who had played *Re-Mission* had taken their antibiotics more consistently and with less resistance or complaint and, surprisingly, maintained higher levels of chemotherapy in their blood compared to those in the control group. The *Re-Mission* kids also seemed to know a lot more about their cancer than the control group after the study was finished – things like the names of particular cells and the biological processes involved in each of their treatments. (The results of the study were published in the peer-reviewed medical journal Pediatrics.)

But, while the game seemed to be working, in the sense that patients who played it were paying more attention to their treatment and seemed to be more motivated to take their medication, it was hard to tell where the self-advocacy was coming from: the textual information in the game, or the act of playing the game? (The game was preloaded with all kinds of information, including some possibly overlong cutscenes about all the bad things that would happen to Roxxi if she didn't take her medicine, and so on.) Was it possible to separate the information from the motivation and see which was having a stronger effect?

Around this time, Cole officially joined HopeLab as the vice president of research and development. After studying the results of the study closely, Cole reasoned it wasn't the information in the game that was having the most impact, but the motivation. To test this, HopeLab partnered with Stanford to conduct a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) study in which the brain activity of patients playing *Re-Mission* was monitored and compared to that of patients who were only watching the game. The results, published in the journal PLoS One in March 2012, showed that neural circuits in the brain related to reward and motivation lit up only in participants who played *Re-Mission*, and not in those who simply watched, explaining why active players were more likely to change their behaviour and attitude in relation to their treatment.

**Cole paid careful** attention to see whether it was the information processing region of the brain that was lighting up when patients played *Re-Mission*, or whether it was regions to do with sustained positive motivation and goal-seeking. "By the time we had done all of these follow-up studies, we were pretty convinced that it was really about that act of playing itself – the chasing cancer cells and learning more about them and getting further in the game – which was turbo charging the good behaviour in the patients."

It seemed unlikely that the patients were forgetting how to take their maintenance chemotherapy, or forgetting the basic principle that maintenance chemotherapy is important for fighting cancer. They all knew all this. More information would not be helpful. But, making kids feel like maintenance chemotherapy was a kind of ammunition for a gun or rocket launcher that they could use to fight this epic foe threatening their wellbeing was a different story. There was also the active versus passive element: why weren't the kids who were watching the game experiencing the same positive behavioural changes as those who were playing it? "The empirical answer is if you watch something passively, your visual cortex lights up – you know the information is coming in," said Cole. "What's different is where that information goes." In other words, how does the brain utilise that information? The area of the brain particularly responsive in participants playing *Re-Mission* was the area that drives goal-seeking behaviour.

Once people know they are in charge of an outcome, they will fight hard to win, even if they don't particularly care about what they are winning. "I mean, you can give them a dead fish at the end of the day, they don't care – they just want to win the game." Game-playing participants also appeared more aroused – their brain was moving around information much quicker, and to more places, than the brains of non-game-playing participants. Finally, Cole noticed the hippocampus – the center of emotion and memory in the brain – of game-playing participants was lighting up pretty regularly compared to non-game-playing participants, meaning that those playing the game were much more likely to form long term memories of their experience than those simply watching. "So if you ▶

wanted to take a piece of information, get it into a person, and then have them do something that is going to stick with them over time, these are the three things you'd really like most to see. One, a lot of positive motivation to do something with the information; two, evidence that their brain was moving the information around and processing it; and three, some proof that their brain was steering this information into long term memory."

**Jo Lennan**, 31, was diagnosed with cancer two years ago. She underwent eight months of chemotherapy starting November 2014. After one surgery, her doctors gave her a choice: continue taking ketamine, a mild painkiller that can cause hallucinations and nightmares, or switch to a stronger drug. Lennan chose to stick with ketamine, even after experiencing a particularly bad nightmare. The experience was rare, she said. "It doesn't come naturally to some doctors to empower their patients' choices. More often, they would prefer to weigh things up themselves and then let you know what you'll be doing. As human beings, though, we usually want reasons to do things, and 'because I say so' isn't as illuminating or motivating as knowledge can be. That's as true for kids as it is for adults."

*Re-Mission* was released in 2006 to near unanimous commendation from the international medical community. The encouraging results of both studies led HopeLab to invest in *Re-Mission 2*, a collection of free online games playable both in browsers and on mobile platforms that adhere to the same principles as the original, only with more gameplay and less informational cutscenes. Game levels start out shorter and easier, game objectives are clearer, and targets more obvious. The gameplay is optimised to help players feel a sense of quick initial accomplishment and progressive growth in skills. The intention was to make *Re-Mission 2* easier to play, and thus appeal to a wide range of ages and both genders.

By switching to a series of smaller minigames, HopeLab was also able to develop *Re-Mission 2* at much less cost (Cole estimates *Re-Mission 2* cost one-tenth of *Re-Mission*'s budget to develop), and use multiple game designers to ultimately create a variety of different gameplay styles. It also allowed HopeLab to do user testing progressively throughout the game development process, rather than waiting until the game was complete and hoping that it worked.

Both *Re-Mission* and *Re-Mission 2* are currently available for free to young cancer patients and institutions in over 80 countries and in partnership with organizations including the Starlight Children's Foundation and the Entertainment Software Association, the gaming industry lobby. At the time of writing, more than 210,000 copies of the original *Re-Mission* have been distributed; *Re-Mission 2* game downloads have also surpassed the 200,000 mark and more than 400,000 game levels have been completed by players.

"This whole venture of doing a serious game was really a shot in the dark," Kato said recently. "We knew we wanted to focus on adherence, and we knew you can't get that out of showing someone a video or telling them or writing a brochure. If you're a kid with cancer, it's scary. You know you're supposed to take your pills. You know if you do it you will live longer. But when you take your pill for chemo, the immediate reward is that your hair falls out, your face blows up and you're sick all the time. *Re-Mission* made it empowering to have to go through all this. It made the kids feel like they were in control, for once."

**HopeLab's success with** the *Re-Mission* games inspired the studio to broaden its focus to other areas that might benefit from a videogame solution. Looking at the landscape of youth-centric health issues, HopeLab settled on childhood obesity, a growing problem increasingly cited by health experts as a danger to the health of Americans today. According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, childhood obesity has more than doubled in children in the last 30 years; in 2012, more than one third of children and adolescents were overweight or obese.

The *Re-Mission* studies had proven that it was possible for a videogame to positively influence behaviour in young people. **Fred Dillon**, HopeLab's director of product development, has helped steer the company away from sick care and towards prevention. "Rather than focusing on helping young adults fight a disease once it has already taken hold, we realized we could actually create tools that support health and wellbeing early in life, and help keep them healthy," Dillon said recently.

To better understand the target demographic, HopeLab interviewed 25 middle-schoolers around the US about everything from their eating and exercise habits to their preferred leisure activities. "It's the age when kids start to figure out whether they're a sport kid or not," Dillon said. The studio then identified where a game would be likely to have the most impact: was it on the eating and calories part of things, or the exercise part?

Ultimately, it was decided it would be much easier to motivate kids to exercise than to get them interested in nutrition, particularly as kids often have little control over what they eat in the first place. HopeLab also wanted to hear from the kids themselves, so the studio launched a competition asking children to submit ideas for products that would increase physical activity. A lot of what came back was based on a simple action-reward structure: one kid submitted an idea for a version of *Dance Dance Revolution*, but with texting – so kids would text with their feet.

The result was a platform of games named *Zamzee*, whose aim is to measure kids' physical activity and reward them for it. Kids (and their families) can earn gift cards through the platform for completing certain physical challenges. The rewards range from monetary (gift cards at a $5 value to places like Amazon or iTunes); pro-social rewards like contributions to a selected charity (ASPCA, participant's school, Save The Children, and so on); and virtual rewards, such as avatar items and graphical 'badges' that appear on users' home screens.

Early pilot tests conducted in partnership with local schools

and universities showed an increase in physical activity of up to 30 per cent. Usually, pilot tests lasted from six to 12 weeks, with 60 to 100 kids. In a six-month, 448-person randomised, controlled study, HopeLab found that kids using Zamzee were 59 percent more active than a control group. (That's the equivalent of doing an extra 45 minutes of non-stop pushups each week.)

It's Dillon's wish for HopeLab to broaden its focus beyond gaming. This means working with everyone from for-profit organisations to healthcare providers to universities – anyone with a vision on how to use technology and games to improve areas like health and psychology. Recently, the lab partnered with the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence to create an app which tracks users' moods throughout the day. Called the Mood Meter, it was originally based on a visual aid in Yale classrooms. The app enables users to plot their feelings, and select strategies to manage each feeling. They can also schedule reminders to update the app throughout the day on mood changes. "We'll work with anybody who wants to make the world a better place," Cole, who is still with HopeLab, said recently.

Back at Lucile Packard Hospital, Lore took us to visit Andrew, a 12-year-old whose leukemia had relapsed. Andrew eyed the iPad hungrily as Lore approached, conceding that while *Re-Mission 2* is hard, he likes it because it gets his brain moving. "It does make you think about [cancer]. It gives you a better idea of what's going on inside your body." Later, Lore visited Mirella, a seven-year-old with leukemia in the room next door to Andrew's. She was in the middle of an argument with her mother about taking her liquid Tylenol. She said it tasted bad. She lay curled in the fetal position on the bed, her small, hairless head the only thing visible above the blankets. She eyed Lore apprehensively as he approached. "Look, Mirella, I've got a game for you." She saw the iPad in his hands and reacted instinctively, throwing the covers off and sitting upright.

Lore handed her the iPad and asked if she'd be interested in playing a new game that would help her feel better about her cancer. She nodded, and Lore clicked on the *Re-Mission 2* icon. She began playing without waiting for Lore's instructions, getting the hang of the game as she went along. Every time Lore would explain something, she would just nod, her eyes glued to the screen.

Mirella's mother watched on. "What did you say this game was called?" she asked Lore. Lore explained the concept. "We sometimes use it to help kids understand what cancer is and why it's important for them to keep fighting," he said, talking to Mirella's mother but keeping his eyes on his young patient.

After ten minutes, Lore told Mirella it was time to take the iPad to another patient. "Did you like the game?" he asked her. She nodded, not unenthusiastically. "Now," Lore continued, "how about that Tylenol? It won't taste so bad, right?"

Mirella threw him a look, as if to say, I know exactly what you're doing, and it won't work. But when her mother picked up the syringe of bright pink liquid, she didn't protest. ■

## "Rather than focusing on helping young adults fight a disease, we realized we could create tools that support health and wellbeing"



**Asi Burak, chairman of Games For Change, which promotes games as a positive social force**




## WORLD OF WARCRAFT
**Developer/publisher** Blizzard **Format** PC **Release** 2004

## WORLD OF WARCRAFT: THE BURNING CRUSADE
**Developer/publisher** Blizzard **Format** PC **Release** 2007

## WORLD OF WARCRAFT: WRATH OF THE LICH KING
**Developer/publisher** Blizzard **Format** PC **Release** 2008

## TITAN
**Developer/publisher** Blizzard **Format** Unannounced **Release** Cancelled

## OVERWATCH
**Developer/publisher** Blizzard **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2016

The game director of Overwatch on false starts and new beginnings at one of the world's most storied studios

**By Chris Thursten**

Photography **James Sheppard**


OVERWCH

During the early 2000s Jeff Kaplan spent a full third of his life in *EverQuest*. He played the game at the highest level as an officer in one of North America's most prominent guilds, Legacy Of Steel. When not in Norrath he pitched novels and short stories to publishers and tinkered with the *Half-Life* map editor WorldCraft. One day, in *EverQuest*, a fellow officer asked if he could try Kaplan's maps. Later, the same guildmate invited him to lunch in Irvine, California, at a game development studio called Blizzard, which Kaplan had never heard of – he didn't play strategy games. The guildmate was the Blizzard designer Rob Pardo; studio co-founder Alan Adham was also a member. A series of lunches over six months eventually revealed themselves to be job interviews. This RTS studio had an idea for making an MMOG, but it needed an MMOG player's expertise to make it happen.

Kaplan's subsequent 15-year career at Blizzard has seen him become design lead on *World Of Warcraft*, the world's most successful massively multiplayer RPG. He oversaw design on the aborted MMOG *Titan* before, in the aftermath of that project's collapse, spearheading work on the phenomenal – and phenomenally popular – *Overwatch*.

## WORLD OF WARCRAFT

**Developer/publisher** Blizzard **Format** PC **Release** 2004

I joined in May of 2002, which is the period when they were wrapping up *Warcraft III* and then starting on the E3 build of *World Of Warcraft*. It was a big deal. *WOW* was going to be at E3 and needed a good showing.

They hired me along with another designer who was going to be on quests named Pat Nagle. Pat and I started from scratch with how a quest should work. We started out more from a creative place: what are the sorts of quests that we want to do in a game, what are those stories, how can we have that type of gameplay? We worked with the programmers to get the tools made so we could create content and then we split up – he started with Elwynn and I started with Westfall. We said, "OK, here we go, you take this zone, I'll take that zone, we'll see where we're at."



*WOW*'s accessibility, a priority for Blizzard co-founder Alan Adham, made it the MMO to beat for over a decade



Elwynn was our first team-wide playtest. We were kind of shocked, because coming from *EverQuest*, ironically you barely did any quests in that game. Our assumption was that we'd give you a quest, you'd go do the quest, and you'd discover a new area of spawns – like, 'Here's where Hogger is, and oh look there's all these gnolls here, I think I'll kill gnolls for a couple of hours.'

We put the team through the playtest and first thing after that everybody is up in arms. 'I ran out of quests! Did something break?' Alan, Pat and I had this realisation: "Oh fuck, we're going to have to quest this whole thing out." We literally had to rethink the project at that moment. Our old estimates for how many quests we thought we were going to do versus how many quests we ended up doing were radically off.

When I think about the effect that *WOW* had on MMOs… I almost think it's broader than that. One, MMOs can be for everyone. MMOs are not just for crazy-hardcore people who are willing to spend one third of their life on this activity. The other, and I guess this goes hand in hand, is that it's not OK for a game to totally lack direction for players who seek it. A lot of players just need something, some sort of direction, or they're going to check out from the game.

In terms of *WOW* being a success, this is going to sound super weird 11 or 12 years after it all happened, but we had huge insecurity about the game. Every interview we'd do, the question we kept getting asked was – it wasn't phrased quite this way, but: 'What business do you have making an MMO? You guys make RTSes.'

Back in that time period the two games that MMO players were most excited about were *EverQuest II* and *Star Wars Galaxies*. Everyone believed [*Galaxies*] was going to rule the universe because it was the two

things that I know I was most excited about in life, which was Star Wars and MMOs. I remember the year that we showed *World Of Warcraft* at E3, we were fully playable – you could run around, go to Scarlet Monastery, do all that stuff – and for *Star Wars Galaxies* they had literally only shown a movie and the movie was winning Best Of E3 awards. Our morale was super low. I think the only one who had confidence was Alan.

It was around that time period that *EverQuest* announced that they had passed 400,000 subscribers. I was thinking we'd be lucky if we got half that, a quarter of that, and Alan Adham stood up and said, "We're going to have one million subscribers, that's how good I think this game is going to be, that's how much I believe in you guys."

I remember looking at Alan. I held him in the highest admiration because he was my first boss, he was one of my mentors, he had hired me, he had founded Blizzard. In that moment I looked at him and thought, 'Wow, he's batshit crazy.'

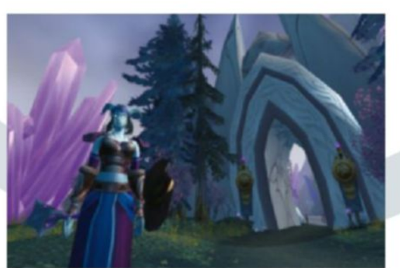


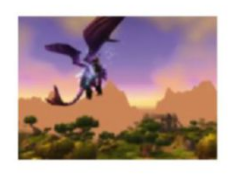
## WORLD OF WARCRAFT: THE BURNING CRUSADE

**Developer/publisher** Blizzard **Format** PC **Release** 2007

I'm not sure how many people know this, but we shipped *World Of Warcraft* with 60 developers. Sixty people made that game. It's something that to this day I'm very proud of, [but] after we launched, because it was such a difficult crunch and such a difficult development cycle, we lost about 20 developers.

We had all of *WOW*'s success to support from a live standpoint, and we had no animators. All of our animators had quit. There's this one patch where we introduced four green dragons. It was literally because we had a dragon model and getting colour shift on it was trivial and we had no one to work on the game at that point. The team was devastated and demoralised. We were pulling boxes from the retail channel so you couldn't even buy *WOW*. You launch this game and then you're like, 'Pull the boxes back! We can't support them on the servers!'

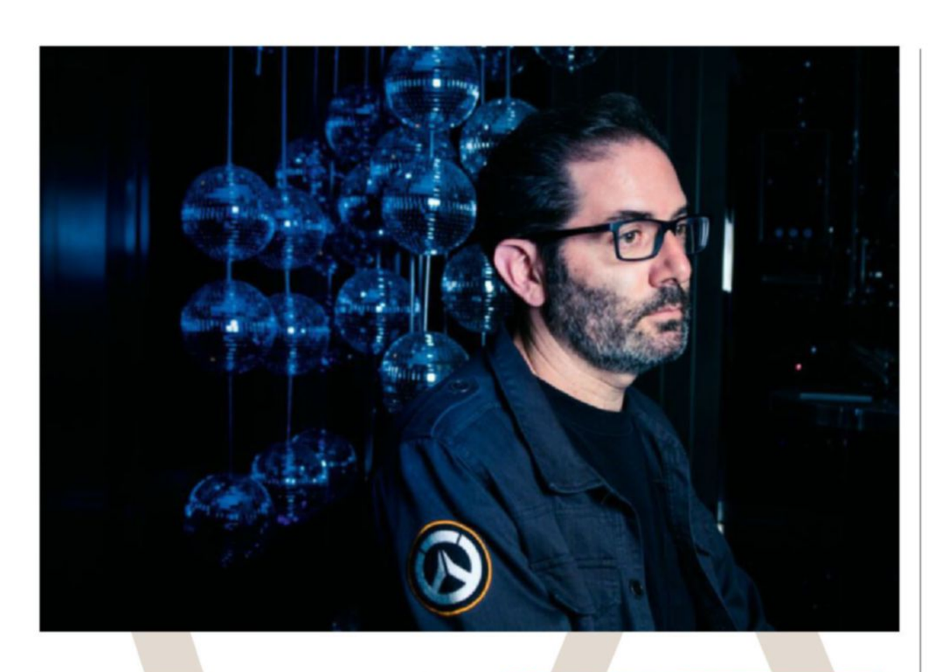






The new Alliance race in *The Burning Crusade* was initially intended to be the Pandaren, but international issues forced an unexpected shift in focus to the Draenei

We had hired some new people. I remember we hired this one server programmer whose name was Brian Gibson-Winge. We're having a team meeting and I remember everyone talking, like, 'What are we doing? Nothing we're doing is good.' Brian was the brand-new guy in the room, and he stands up and says, "Hey guys, I know I'm the new guy and I probably shouldn't speak up, but what's wrong with you? You made *World Of Warcraft* and this is the most awesome fucking game in the world." Suddenly, as we started hiring more people like Brian, the team got reinvigorated. There was a huge turning point going from vanilla *WOW* into *The Burning Crusade*, and it was because of the influx of new people who really inspired the team. That and the first Blizzcon were a big morale boost for us. ▶



# WORLD OF WARCRAFT: WRATH OF THE LICH KING

**Developer/publisher** Blizzard **Format** PC **Release** 2008

The team since *Wrath Of The Lich King* has done amazing things – I think the best expansion they have ever made is *Legion*. But at that time, there was something very special about *Lich King*. When we reflected on *The Burning Crusade* we realised that we had a story that was probably a little bit too convoluted for most people to understand. There's probably five factions of Blood Elves. As lead designer on the game I didn't even know which Blood Elves were which at a certain point.

The other thing that was really amiss in *Burning Crusade* was that we had one of the most compelling characters in Illidan, but we only let players interact with Illidan in the Black Temple. Such a small percentage of our players got to do that content because it was tuned to be so hardcore, and it was so inaccessible. The massive lesson coming from *The Burning Crusade* into *Wrath Of The Lich King* was, if you have this front-of-the-box compelling character like Illidan or Arthas, give it to people! Let people interact with it. It's no mistake that the first second that you log into *Wrath Of The Lich King*, especially if you make a Death Knight, who's standing in front of you? It's Arthas.

Also, we had Alex Afrasiabi, who was probably the most famous *EverQuest* player of all time. We hired him during vanilla *WOW*, but I feel like Alex's curve was really starting to peak with *Wrath Of The Lich King*. We put Alex in charge of all quest design for that expansion. Alex was the one who made that Death Knight starting experience, which I think at the time and maybe to this day is one of the greatest storytelling quest experiences in the game. It made everybody question what we had done before.









*Wrath Of The Lich King*'s more involved storytelling for solo adventurers was influential on subsequent expansions, once again setting a standard that other MMOGs would scramble to match up to

# TITAN

**Developer/publisher** Blizzard **Format** Unannounced **Release** Cancelled

I moved over from *WOW* to *Titan* the week *Wrath Of The Lich King* shipped. It was November of 2008. I remember it well because we have this tradition at Blizzard when we ship a game: we do a champagne toast out in front of the orc statue that's at the studio. The *Wrath Of The Lich King* champagne toast was memorable for three reasons. One was because it was *Wrath Of The Lich King*, and we were very proud of it. Two, it was my birthday. Three, it was the day that Barack Obama was elected for his first term. I remember being quite drunk when I found out that Obama had won the election. I was like, 'Wow, that's awesome!' Then I passed out a few hours later. Very shortly after that, like the next day, I moved over to what is now called Team 4 to work on *Titan*.

Things started off great. There was an enthusiasm and an ambition to the project that made it very alluring for a lot of us. For the first year that I was on the project, from 2009, it was just a lot of brainstorming, a lot of excited false starts were happening, a lot of technology exploration. It was somewhere at the end of 2009 that the red flags started going off

for me. 'This doesn't feel like we're making the right type of project.' That just increased as the years went on.

The week before *Diablo III* shipped they moved Ray [Gresko, production director] onto *Titan* to help save the project, so he didn't even get to enjoy the launch with his team. We were pulled into this meeting and told, "Hey, you're production director, you're game director; you guys need to try and save this project." Ray said we should get lunch and we took the lead producer Matt Hawley with us. Ray sits down across from Matt and I and says, "Tell me what I need to know about *Titan*." Matt looks at me, and I look at Ray, and I say, "Well, we need to shut it down."

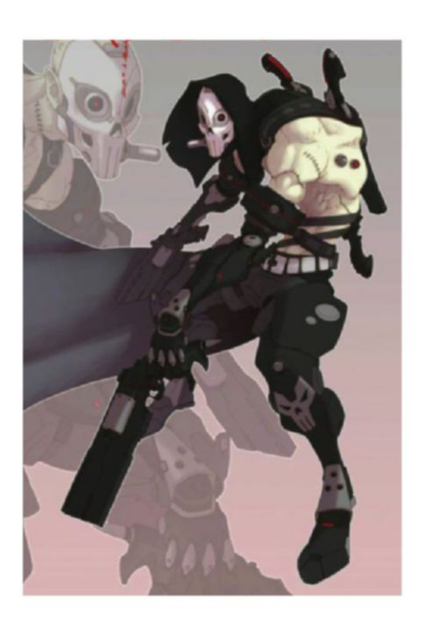
Ray was taken aback. He said, "Well, they brought me on this project to save it. You have to respect the fact that I can't just shut it down." Six months passed and during that six months we replaced some of the leadership on the team. We now had a new tech director, a guy called Mike Elliott, because the technology on *Titan* was just a mess, nothing worked, and we brought Mike over to help. Ray, Mike and I were in a one-on-one with the three of us; I don't know how it's a one-on-one with three people, but that's what we call them. We were in this meeting and Ray had his moment where he said, "Oh god, you and Matt were right, we need to shut it down, it's just not going to happen." And Mike says: "Wait! I was just brought onto the project to save it! We can't shut it down!" So we went another six months and then it was after another one of those one-on-ones where we said, "It's time to go to studio leadership and tell them that it's not going to happen."

I don't think most people realise this, but Blizzard has cancelled more games than we've made. When you're making a new game at Blizzard it's more likely that your game's going to get cancelled than it's going to see the light of day. Now I don't think that any developer working on a game believes that you're the one – I think we all think that we're special.

Something that was unique about *Titan* was that it's not usually the team that says, 'This is not going to happen.' It's a very daunting thing to do. You're basically saying, 'We failed to do our jobs.' You don't know what's going to happen. You don't know if they're going to say, 'Thanks for your time here, be on your way.' That, and most projects go on for that length of time – ultimately, I did six years [on the *Titan* project].



"IT'S A VERY DAUNTING THING TO DO. YOU'RE SAYING, 'WE FAILED TO DO OUR JOBS'"



*Titan*'s art and PVP design hugely influenced *Overwatch*, and the *Overwatch* team has subsequently paid tribute to the cancelled MMO through skins and events

We knew in about April of 2013 that we were going to shut the project down, but very few people knew. Only the top leadership of Activision knew: Bobby [Kotick] knew, Mike Morhaime, Frank Pearce, myself, Ray Gresko, Rob Pardo, Mike Elliott. The rest of the team didn't know. We were trying to work on a contingency plan because we had a 140-person team. We wanted to be careful in that moment that we didn't devastate a lot of people, make people feel that they'd wasted their careers.

The initial plan was that we would come up with a new game concept, and then we would inform the team at the end of May that we were shutting *Titan* down – however, there was this new game that we were going to make instead. That plan, as I say it now, sounds so naive. I have to pretend that we're still making *Titan* during the day, and at night and on the weekends I'm going home and I'm putting these pitch decks together for different game concepts. I'm absolutely fucking panicked.

Instead we came up with a plan to inform the team that we were shutting the project down. Luckily the studio was in dire need of help on our other projects, so it was the perfect time to have a lot of developers free up. Of the 60 remaining developers, the vast majority were engineers and programmers. We had built a new engine for *Titan*, but the engine was a mess, and we said, 'Do whatever we have to do so this work isn't totally wasted.' Then a very small group of us, about ten, were given the assignment over a six-week period to come up with game pitches. If we came up with something compelling, the team would go on to make that. If we didn't, the remainder of us would be redistributed to the other projects. We were in this weird mourning period, but we suddenly had to be the most creative [we'd ever been] in our lives.

# OVERWATCH

**Developer/publisher** Blizzard **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2016

At first we really thought that we were the MMO team. The first idea we worked on was an MMO that was not in the *Warcraft* universe, but was in one of the other Blizzard universes – [you have] tonnes of questions about what that might be, I imagine. The second idea we worked on was another MMO concept that was not in an existing universe, and not in the *Titan* universe – it was a brand-new MMO concept. It was hard because we were really scoping everything back. Whereas *Titan* had been the most ambitious MMO I've ever seen, we were doing these other MMO pitches with one hand tied behind our back, knowing the time period we were given was not realistic to make an MMO. A lot of us had MMO experience, knew exactly what it took, and we knew, like, there's no way this was going to happen.

We were having a class discussion – it was going to be a class-based MMO – and our class designer, a guy called Geoff Goodman, said, "I wish instead of having six classes or nine classes, we could have dozens of classes. But what if our classes had fewer things that they did and were more specialised?" It really just lit the lightbulb for me. I went back to my desk after that and I was really inspired by what Geoff had wanted to do, but I was actually thinking to myself, 'I don't think that's an MMO.'

I was fascinated with the shooter concept. The thing that worked the most on *Titan*, because *Titan* had shooting as its combat model, was its PvP shooting. The two things I loved most in gaming were MMOs and shooters. I started thinking about a more tightly scoped game using that Geoff Goodman concept of dozens of classes with abilities.

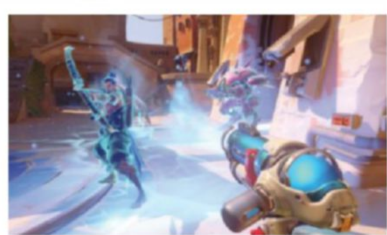
I started pulling a bunch of Arnold Tsang concept art of characters for *Titan*. We had this class called the Jumper in *Titan* that had Blink, and Recall, and Pulse Bomb, and about 30 other abilities, but I always felt like Blink, Recall and Pulse Bomb – and the Pulse Pistols – were the coolest part. Suddenly it was like, 'Well, what if the Jumper uses this art and has only these abilities, and what if it's a person – instead of this nameless, faceless class, these are actual characters?' had that pitch deck and the rest of the team was working on MMO number two, and Ray Gresko came by and looks over my shoulder. I show it to Ray and he's instantly like, "Oh my god, that's what we should do."

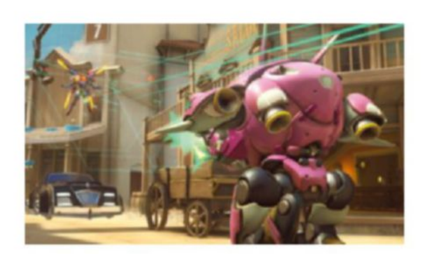
So we took the deck and we grabbed [Chris] Metzen and he lit up right away. Especially when he started to think about how it's not a generic sniper, it's Widowmaker, who was turned against her husband in this cold-blooded assassination attempt. That was so much more compelling to him than these generic classes. He had the same reaction Ray had, and Matt Hawley our producer was overhearing our conversation and said to me, 'You need to pitch this to the team tomorrow morning.'

Matt's the one who forced the game to get named *Overwatch*. We were taking the deck to the team, and the deck had a very not-good name for a shooter. Matt's like, "There's nothing less inspiring than what you have that deck named right now. You have to come up with a name for it." And I said, "I want to call it *Overwatch*." Overwatch was always a world group in *Titan*, but it was totally different – but all of us loved the name. So there was a moment of rebirth that we could actually call this new game *Overwatch*, and we pitched to the team and almost unanimously they said, "Yes, we want to make this game."

Being an individual developer on Team 4, it was like a whole new era when we started *Overwatch*. That was very good. The problem was that we needed to get the game concept approved by Blizzard and by Activision. The year was 2013 and we had just failed enormously at creating Blizzard's next MMO. It was supposed to be this MMO shooter. Then we come back and we're sitting in the boardroom with the top Activision executives – Thomas Tippl, Dennis Durkin, Bobby Kotick – and what do we pitch to them,







Mirroring *World Of Warcraft*, *Overwatch*'s vast success is owed to its characterful art and immediate accessibility. It has found a huge audience among veteran shooter players and those who'd never normally compete online

the guys who have enormous success with the *Call Of Duty* series? We walk into the pitch meeting with a shooter. They were super polite and super nice to us, but you could sense this undercurrent of, 'Oh god, of all things, what are you idiots doing?'

The saving grace was a picture that Arnold Tsang had drawn – an early version of the character lineup. We're pitching and there's a lot of hard questions coming at us and Bobby [Kotick] just stops the meeting and says, "Go back two slides." I'm thinking, 'Oh, fuck, what was two slides ago?' We go back and it's that Arnold Tsang picture. The room just got quiet and you could see the wheels turning in Bobby's head. He just said, "I've never seen art like this, I've never seen characters like this." It was the only positive thing that was said in the *Overwatch* pitch meeting – how Bobby emotionally reacted to the art. What that bought us was that we had until March to put together a core combat demo of the game.

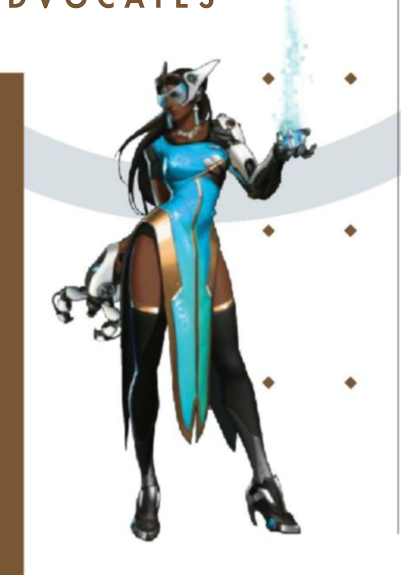
The demo we made was Temple Of Anubis, fully artified and lit in our engine, which now actually worked, and we had Reaper, Widowmaker, Pharah and Tracer. And it was just the funnest thing we had ever played. The Blizzard guys loved it, the Activision guys came and because they're shooter fans, they were screaming and yelling with joy. It was just the most positive, off-to-the-races moment ever.

The next step after that demo was Blizzcon 2014, which was intended to be our announce. Ray [Gresko] was the inspirational leader on the team who believed in us more than anything, and he said to us, 'I want us to become one of those Blizzard stories one day'; the team that gets cancelled one year and announces a project at Blizzcon the following year. Ray had such an amazing plan to get us to that Blizzcon.

We knew we were going to face a couple of issues. One was that we had to publicly cancel *Titan*. Then I started focusing on how we could announce the game, what content we should have that would make people believe in the game and not be disappointed by the concept.



**"WHAT WAS AWESOME IS THAT THE FANS BECAME OUR STRONGEST ADVOCATES"**



What I was worried about was a couple of things. One, we weren't making an MMO. Two, Blizzard was making a shooter and we weren't a shooter company. Three, I thought people would think we were overly derivative of either various MOBA games, or games like *Team Fortress 2*.

Every time we tried to pitch the game to somebody they were sceptical, but every time they played the core combat demo they were like, 'Oh my god, this is awesome.' So I put together this content plan that was to have three maps, because I wanted to show that the game actually existed and wasn't just this smoke-and-mirrors E3 demo. The big push was for 12 heroes. The reason for that number was that I wanted to very cleanly clear the nine classes from *Team Fortress*. I felt that if we had nine or fewer classes during our announce, players would naturally map every one of our heroes to a *Team Fortress 2* class. Which is funny because when the announce actually happened, the fans who read about it online immediately jumped to that conclusion. What was awesome is that the fans that attended the show played so much of *Overwatch* there that they became our strongest advocates. 'Guys, I know there's obvious inspiration from games like *Team Fortress* but they're doing something different. This is a very different experience.'

Nothing to me was more rewarding than that moment at Blizzcon 2014 when Chris announced the game and then it was just there on the show floor and everyone was playing it. I forgot how important that was, not only to me personally but to everybody on my team as well. 'This is the reason we do this, because of those guys out there playing the game right now.'

The team today is in an awesome place. I think we had a little bit of a rocky start to becoming a live-service team, but the team has really hit its stride now. They feed off the live game, they feed off the community, and they really are ready for some of the next big challenges that we want to do. They're always inspired by not what's going on now, but thinking about what *Overwatch* could be someday: where we could take it. ■

THE MAKING OF...



# PERSONA 5

The high-school RPG that shows the benefits of overthinking it

**By Nathan Brown**

**Developer/publisher** Atlus
**Format** PS3, PS4
**Origin** Japan
**Release** 2016

**Katsura Hashino** offers a simple explanation for why *Persona 5* was in development for so long. You would think the latest instalment in a long-running, beloved series, built to a familiar template, would not take too long to make. Yet *Persona 5* arrived more than eight years after predecessor *Persona 4*, missing an entire console generation in the process. What on Earth happened?

"We had spent a very long time working on *Persona 5* and were satisfied with the direction it was going in," he tells us. "However, as we reached this point, deep in development, Sony released PlayStation 4. We couldn't ignore the opportunity to bring the game out on this new console, with all the advancements it offered.

"We had to look at how we could adapt what we had already created for PS3, and realised that the 2D graphics we'd created weren't suitable for the new system. We basically had to redraw everything. It was the only way we could utilise the power of PS4, and it increased the development time massively."

Perhaps. Yet we suspect Hashino himself might have had something to do with it. Our time with him makes clear that this is a man who thinks deeply about everything – and perhaps a little too much. When we ask what made him switch the game's setting from the sleepy rural town of Inaba that played host to *Persona 4* to bustling central Tokyo, his answer clocks in at a shade over 700 words. A request for clarification yields a further 400. His comments, while perhaps shedding a little light on the reasons for *Persona 5*'s near-decade in development, also reveal the sheer depth of thought and thematic planning that goes into a game that, on the face of it, treads a very similar path to its predecessors. Hashino had his central theme for the game: phantom thieves, inspired by Japanese folklore and its heroes like Ishikawa Goemon, and Maurice Leblanc's Arsène Lupin. He felt thieves were naturally at home in big cities, so *Persona 5* would need to be set in one.

"Initially, I was convinced I needed to create a fictional city for the game's setting," Hashino says. "To distinguish it from the mountainous region in which *Persona 4* took place, I researched coastal cities like Hakodate, Nagasaki and Yokohama." An early test image had the Enoshima Electric Railway, a two-car train that traces a ten-kilometre stretch of the Kanagawa coast, running in the background.




**While the battle system is true to the series formula, the pace is faster. It's an essential contrast to the game's slower, more stealth-focused approach to dungeon exploration**

But Hashino felt it didn't quite fit. "I couldn't figure out why, and I lamented over it for a long while. Then I realised that when you think about classic phantom thieves – like Lupin, who caused a stir in Paris, or Niju-Menso, the fiend with 20 faces, in Tokyo – they're associated not just with cities, but *capitals*. *Persona 5* absolutely needed the same. I needed a setting where an outlaw could shine in a place overcrowded with people; where you feel like you're just another cog in the wheel, yet kids from a nameless high school could still make an impact."

"WE BASICALLY HAD TO REDRAW EVERYTHING. IT WAS THE ONLY WAY WE COULD UTILISE THE POWER OF PS4"

Tokyo is, of course, a big place, and while *Persona 5*'s world was intended to be larger than that of its predecessors, it could hardly take in the whole city. Hashino and team eventually settled on Sangen-Jaya, a lesser-known Tokyo district home to trendy bars, hip restaurants and, as luck might have it, Atlus itself. "I started drawing inspiration from the scenery around me on my commute," Hashino says. "I looked up at the Shuto Expressway towering over me, a road built high in the air to accommodate Tokyo's overpopulation. It made me feel claustrophobic, like someone put a lid over the city to block out the sky. I thought about the more charming sections of the city, lined with old-fashioned restaurants, and how they're rumoured to be demolished sooner or later. The city you know can change just like that.

"I rediscovered Tokyo all over again – a lively, but shady city in which you can leave work on a Friday night and come across drunks getting on in years, rambling nonsense. The same people who used to bristle with energy and talk of freedom in their youth. I wanted the protagonist to live in a place just like that, boarding with a retired shop owner grumbling about the way things used to be. That's what ultimately made me choose Sangen-Jaya. Of course, it helped that the entire staff was very familiar with the location! And it made it very easy to scout."

**So – finally – the** location was chosen, and compared to that you'd expect the character-design job to run a little more smoothly by comparison. After all, the *Persona* games follow a certain path when it comes to their central cast. The protagonist must be a new arrival in an unknown place, in order to immediately position him as an outcast of sorts. Adults must be stern, aloof and probably up to something; your group of friends will be kids struggling to come to terms with what society – their families, teachers or peer groups – expect from them.

Yet by changing location to a big city, Hashino and team had to rethink conventions a little. How does any one person stand out in a city of 13 million people? "Unlike previous games, we didn't design the main characters to stick out among their NPC peers," Hashino says. "While it might be interesting within the school that Ann [Takamaki, of mixed race and one of the first friends the protagonist makes in the game] has lived abroad, once the school day ends, she goes back home just like everyone else. Pulled back from the school setting, Ann is an insignificant part of the big city. That's why we relied on NPC students to communicate the dry, urban atmosphere – the feeling that school is just a waypoint in life."

That sentiment is reinforced by the sheer size of the world – which is broken up, as ever, into small, discrete sections that serve to mirror our relationships with the cities we live in. *Persona 5* has you spend plenty of time in Shibuya, but you'll barely see the iconic scramble crosswalk or the famous 109 building. To the cast of kids, Shibuya is a metro station where you change trains on the way to school. It's the

underground mall where you meet up with pals or work a part-time job. It's a side street with a diner, a cinema, a convenience store and an arcade.

For many players, these places are where *Persona* works its magic. They are where a young protagonist becomes kinder, smarter and more confident; where he builds relationships with those around him; where the dungeon-crawling RPG gives way to a teen comedy, a relationship drama, a musing on the struggles of the young. Yet all these elements are, ultimately, in service to the combat system. Spend enough time with a girl to max out the social link between you and she'll eventually fall for you, sure – but every step on the way to rank ten lets you fuse more powerful personas for use in battle. The *Persona* series may do a better job than most at hiding it, but Hashino admits that combat is the true heart of them all.

"It's at the core of all roleplaying games," he says. "All other features – facilities, equipment, customisation options, collecting personas, the characters, even the community system – all come together to serve a single purpose: to make winning battles feel satisfying. This doesn't apply to all RPGs, of course, but on the titles I work on, it's my chief priority."

The end result is a familiar one to series fans, a game of identifying, then targeting, an enemy's elemental weak spot, knocking them to the floor so your entire group can pile on top of them. Some tweaks to the formula were made – each character was given a gun or similar projectile weapon, for instance, while the phantom-thief conceit led Atlus to design a system whereby you could enter a negotiation with a downed foe, rather than simply destroying them. Dungeon design was overhauled too, discarding *Persona 4*'s randomised battlegrounds and replacing them with hand-crafted, puzzle-heavy, stealth-focused palaces. Still, those who had played a *Persona* game before would find themselves on familiar ground as soon as the fists started flying.

That wasn't always going to be the case: during early development Atlus experimented with a freeform, realtime combat system. "When we tried it, it tempted us to do more than we should," Hashino says. "We wanted combat to be the culmination of all your pre-battle preparation, but once you gained control of the characters, there was an urge to work solely within the battles, instead of relying on preparation and planning.

"If we changed the battle system to be action-oriented, providing instant gratification, we'd have to rethink the game around that notion. So, in the end, we modified the battle system with the goal of enhancing features, while incorporating thief-like elements to make dungeon exploration feel more dynamic. We sped up the pacing to let players stylishly show off. I'm sure some might see the battle commands and think they're old, but the battle system is an important component – one that ties the whole game together."

We can't talk about the creation of *Persona 5* without discussing another vital element in tying all those disparate mechanical strands together: the user interface. *Persona 5*'s is one of the best in the business, maybe the best of them all; absurdly stylish, yet always legible, it's a rare game that manages to make even the mundane – a post-battle results screen, a line of dialogue, a smartphone screen – look impossibly cool. From very early in development, Hashino and his team recognised that the *Persona* games were known for their stylish UIs, and that *Persona 5*'s would have to do the same.

**"To elevate *Persona 5*'s** UI from its predecessors, we needed a concrete concept – like how a story needs a theme," he says. "Without that, it would just end up a variation on the existing UI. The design staff was stuck on this, initially, so I pitched what would become the basis of our 'pop punk' art style. *Persona 5* emulates picaresque novels, and the game's visual design reflects this through dark, enclosed atmospheres. To contrast this, the UI that overlaps it moves vigorously, as if raging to break things down. Our goal was to have the UI stir the player to action, even during bitter, dark scenes.

"Although, at some point, we overdid it. There was so much information on the screen, the UI was incoherent and impossible to follow. We wound up forming a UI test team to discern the hard-to-see parts, then fixed them as much as possible. It cost quite a bit, but was well worth it."

The whole project must have cost a lot, in fairness, but the results show it was money well spent. Development may have lasted a lot longer than originally intended, but almost 350,000 copies were sold in *Persona 5*'s first three days on sale in Japan. Within a month, it had become the biggest seller in Atlus' 30 years in business. It's even performed well in the west, topping the UK retail charts in its first week on sale despite a conservative print run.

It's quite the send off for Hashino who, after 12 years as the director of the *Persona* series, is leaving it behind, and heading up the creation of a new RPG series for Atlus. As we've learned, he has a tendency to overthink things. But he's at a loss to explain why *Persona*, of all JRPGs, has found such a following in the west.

"I wish someone could tell me why," he says. "What I can tell you, though, is that while the series takes place in Japan, we don't develop it with the intention of catering to a Japanese audience. Nor do we factor in our overseas fans. Whether it's planning, design, or music, we simply strive to do our best. We select a theme, then work our brains out." ■




**Katsura Hashino**
Game director

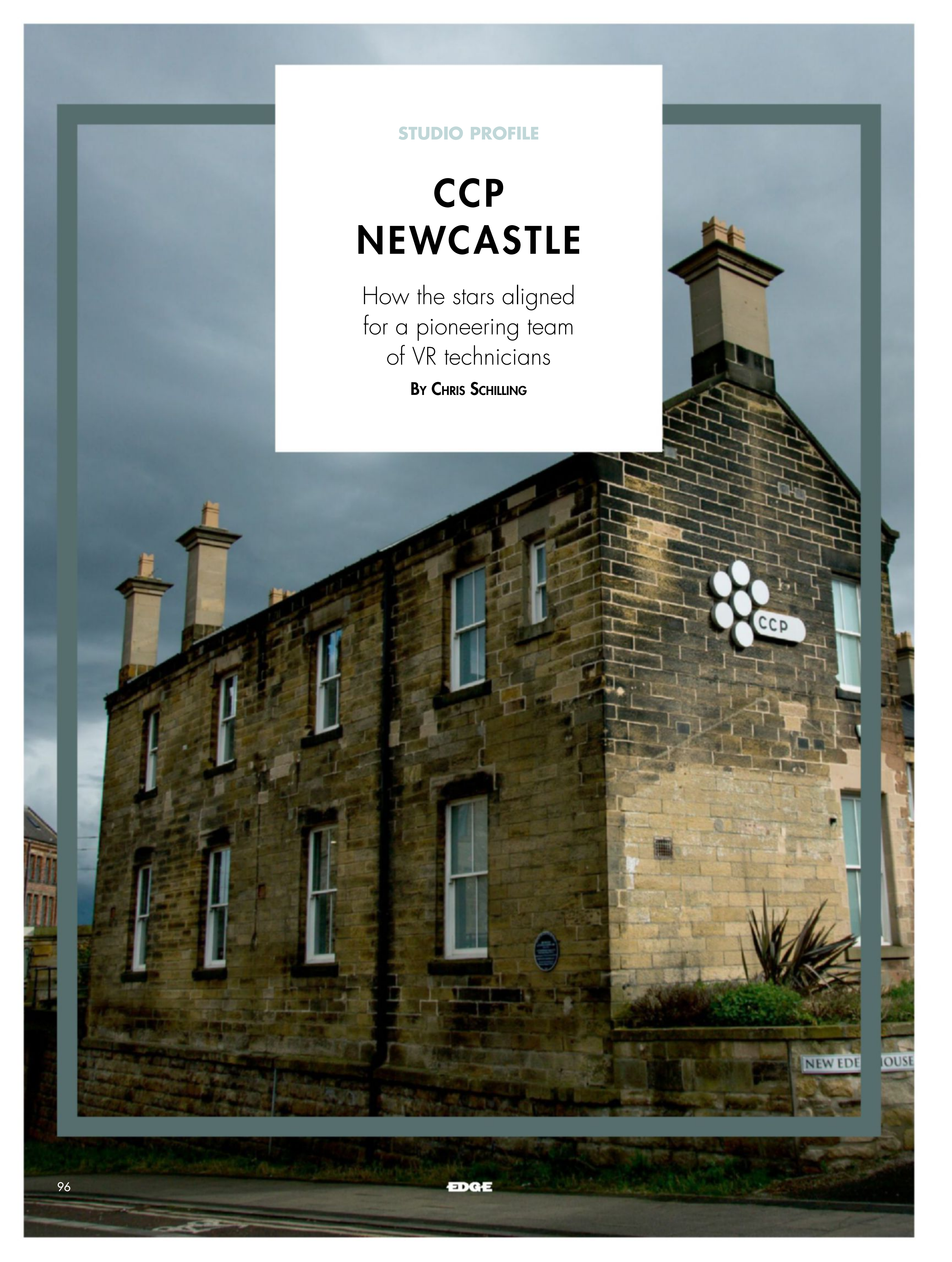
**When choosing *Persona 5*'s location, how conscious were you of the *Shin Megami Tensei* series, which is also set in Tokyo?**
I didn't want to overlap with that, which leans heavily on the phrase 'the real Tokyo' to add realism and convey the dual nature of our own society. In *Persona*, these are ultimately coming-of-age stories depicting the mental development of high-schoolers. A vague, but familiar, fictional city might be useful in conveying the universality of the high-school experience.

**That choice took a long time. How mindful were you of delaying development?**
I guess the truth is that my planning did take longer than expected, which caused some trouble for my staff. But I'm a firm believer that locking down the setting is the first step to giving players a sense of immersion. Once I realised why it had to be Tokyo, the rest of the planning came naturally.

**What's the secret to good UI design?**
Before I became a director, I was a planner that primarily handled battle systems. This gave me experience working with the placement and functionality of UI in battle and camp menus. The main UI designer for *Persona* is someone I've been working with since my planner days. We talked endlessly about things like placement that wouldn't confuse the player, the movement and line of sight, the position and timing of visual components, the colours and so on. We wanted to make sure the UI was as stress-free as possible – to help players keep their focus on the gameplay. Imagine an assistant quickly handing tools to a doctor during surgery. That's how I picture it [laughs].




**1** The Personas you summon in battle are as bizarre as ever. They're intended to reflect the personalities of their owners. **2** The story is told through flashbacks, while our hero is being interrogated by police. Hence the mugshot stylings of this piece of promotional art. **3** Post-battle win screens vary by character depending on which one dealt the final blow. Like much of *Persona 5*, all of them are absurdly stylish. **4** The Tokyo skyline in the background of the game's box art shows how important Hashino's eventual choice of location was. It is as important as any other cast member. **5** While the *Persona* series has long cast its protagonist as misfits, this is the first game to treat them as rebels. While each is awkward or troubled in their own way, Atlus' character designers also has to ensure the cast looked fundamentally cool, whatever they're wearing




STUDIO PROFILE

# CCP NEWCASTLE

How the stars aligned for a pioneering team of VR technicians

By Chris Schilling




**Founded** 2010
**Employees** 40
**Key staff** Ryan Geddes (VR brand director), Owen O'Brien (executive producer), Rich Smith (technical director), Andrew Willans (lead designer, *Eve Valkyrie*)
**URL** www.ccpgames.com
**Selected softography** *Dust 514, Eve Valkyrie*
**Current projects** *Eve Valkyrie*

There's something wonderfully unlikely about *Eve Valkyrie*. The game with which CCP Newcastle has now established itself is a compact, fast-paced VR shooter, built by a small team. Yet it's set within the universe of the biggest, slowest space game in existence. It's a curious kind of offshoot in many respects, but **Ryan Geddes**, brand director of CCP's VR portfolio, thinks otherwise. Virtual reality, he says, has been embedded within the company's genes for quite some time.

"A couple of the early founders of the company, including Hilmar [Veigar Pétursson, CEO], were part of a proto-VR movement in the late 1990s and early 2000s that was especially big in Iceland," Geddes says. "Those guys tried to make it work along with everybody else who was into VR at the time, but as we now know with hindsight, the hardware just wasn't ready yet. The parts needed to make this as cheaply and efficiently as possible just weren't around."

So when VR's time seemed to have come once more, those from that original movement who remained at CCP vowed to invest in it. As the Kickstarter campaign for Oculus Rift was launched, CCP was one of the first companies to back it, albeit without any firm ideas in mind of how to utilise the new technology. When the first version of Oculus Rift, DK1, arrived, a small team based within the company's headquarters at Reykjavik began to experiment with the headset. The group built a game prototype based on a simple conceit: what would it be like to fly an *Eve Online* fighter craft from a firstperson perspective? The group took it to Fanfest, CCP's annual *Eve* celebration, and earned a rapturous response for their efforts. The suits took note, and decided it should be developed into a full game. Five people from that team were then flown over to CCP Newcastle to flesh out the prototype. "They shipped over five guys and four of them were actually British anyway, which definitely made the transition easier," producer **Owen O'Brien** laughs. "That was quite fortuitous, I guess, so it wasn't such a huge culture shock coming over here to the UK."

**The stars had** aligned in similar fashion during the studio's formation, back in 2010 – not that the beginning felt particularly auspicious. "A lot of game studios are founded effectively because something has gone bad somewhere else," technical director **Rich Smith** tells us, and such was the case for the staffers who found themselves out of work at Midway Newcastle




**Andrew Willans (left), lead designer on *Eve Valkyrie*, and Ryan Geddes, brand director of CCP Games' VR output**

when their parent company went under. Smith was suddenly looking for a job, but was simultaneously keen to keep his core technical team together. During his search, he spoke to CCP's business-development team and found that the publisher was in need of some programming support for its upcoming firstperson shooter *Dust 514*. A dozen PS3 technical specialists with years of experience working in Unreal Engine 3 fit the bill very nicely indeed. "We managed to

**"A LOT OF GAME STUDIOS ARE FOUNDED EFFECTIVELY BECAUSE SOMETHING HAS GONE BAD SOMEWHERE ELSE"**

do a deal within the space of about a week that saw the 12 of us all become CCP employees," Smith says. "An office was set up for us, and various operations people were parachuted in to get it set up. From [CCP] agreeing to set up a studio in Newcastle, we were up and running with a network of PCs and actively writing code about three days later."

Such expediency may sound surprising, but perhaps says something about the difficulties presented by the project. *Dust 514* was an ambitious idea, to say the least. CCP aimed to link it directly to *Eve Online*, so player actions within one game would influence the other. For an embryonic studio, this was an unprecedented technical challenge. "Part of the uniqueness of *Dust* was that, rather than the levels being static, you were playing on thousands of different locations across all the big planets in the *Eve* universe," Smith says. "Every time you played a battle in a different location, it had to feel like somewhere different." The team conceived a system whereby individual city-block-sized chunks of geometry were stitched together into the various landscapes, but that in turn caused its own problems. "Not only did we have to work out how we could drop these installations into the landscape, but we also had to figure out how to light the whole thing so it all looked consistent," Smith adds.

Geddes suggests that it was a game ahead of its time, acknowledging its successes while also admitting that it didn't quite come together as the publisher had envisaged. "In a lot of ways we succeeded with that core ambition of bringing all these disparate pieces together, but there were some core elements of the moment-to-moment gameplay that we just didn't get as well as we would have liked," he concedes. "And I think that the game ultimately suffered a bit because of that."

The game's lights were finally dimmed in May 2016, but with CCP Newcastle's technical work out of the way by launch day, the studio had long since begun to explore other avenues. A mobile *Eve* spin-off was mooted before the original prototype for *Valkyrie* all but fell into its lap in spring 2013. "We had these five guys who had cobbled together this early VR prototype in their spare time in Reykjavik, and paired them with the guys at Newcastle, who had this great core technical knowledge and knowhow," Geddes explains. "And then we [recruited] Owen, who knows how to ship great games. We brought all three things together in Newcastle. It really was a special group."

*Eve: Valkyrie*'s lead designer **Andrew Willans**, meanwhile, joined a little later; again, a degree of good fortune was involved in his arrival. Having spent years at Ubisoft working on blockbusters like *Driver San Francisco*, *Watch Dogs* and *The Crew*, Willans found himself ▶





At the present time, CCP Newcastle remains a single-project studio – all members of staff are still working on *Eve Valkyrie*. "We're still doing these regular free updates," producer Owen O'Brien explains. "That's an ongoing commitment"

liberated by the experience of working within the six-strong team that made *Grow Home* at Newcastle studio Reflections. "I got a buzz from the simple joy of experimenting with a toy and having that sense of play back in my life, and my career," he says. "I thought, 'This is amazing, I want more of this.'" He subsequently began to experiment with VR as part of an after-work club of sorts, before playing an early version of *Valkyrie* at GDC, which prompted another epiphany. "It was so overwhelming," he recalls. "I was like, 'This is it, this is what I want to do with my life.' And then I was absolutely amazed to find out it was happening in Newcastle, where I already was, working on *The Division* at Reflections." For Willans it was a dream project: a relatively small game that would be quick to both prototype and iterate upon, with an ideal team of 30-35 people. "That ballooned to the dizzy heights of 40, but we never exceeded that," he smiles.

**If all the** pieces of the puzzle seemed to be slotting neatly into place for CCP Newcastle, the studio was still working with a nascent technology whose foundations were constantly shifting. The team's broad technical experience certainly helped, but trying to maintain the high performance necessary for a smooth VR experience across all platforms was proving a significant challenge. "Our VR partners were working on their stuff at the same time we were trying to work on the game, so when we started on *Valkyrie* we didn't know what the ultimate target platform would look like," Smith explains. "New versions of hardware were coming out, there were rumours swirling around about what the final specs might be, and for a large portion of the project we had no special information from these partners about them. It was all top secret on their side, so we were trying to make a whole bunch of assumptions. As this changed, we found ourselves having to react to those changes in specifications and software, and the devkits that were available, while still ensuring the game continued to work."

*Valkyrie* debuted in March 2016 for Oculus headsets, before being ported to PlayStation 4 in time for the arrival of PlayStation VR seven months later. Yet the studio's work was far from done. A little more than a year on from release, *Valkyrie* is much improved compared to its original incarnation, and the studio is committed to adding features for the foreseeable future. It has already received five major updates so far, and it's clear from talk of content rollouts and roadmaps that CCP Newcastle has plenty more in the offing.

**"I WOULDN'T BE TEASING IF I SAID WE'RE ALWAYS LOOKING AT NEW TECHNOLOGY AND EVEN FURTHER AFIELD"**

This was, O'Brien says, always part of the plan for a company that knows plenty about supporting games well beyond release; CCP was keen from the start that *Valkyrie* was never going to be a fire-and-forget kind of game. "I wouldn't say it's a different game now, but it's a much bigger one," he says, "and it's much stronger for all the updates that we've done. We've worked with our community, getting feedback and reacting to it. We've still got a [list] of things we want to do, and we'll adjust that based on what works and what doesn't, and what new things come into the market."

There's certainly a steady influx of new VR players, and CCP Newcastle has found it's been able to build a happy and active community around its game – and with a small team, it doesn't need blockbuster sales to keep the lights on. The drip-feed of extra modes and features can't have done *Valkyrie* any harm, and it's found an audience among streamers, too. But it's the game's evolving multiplayer component that has kept many coming back for more, which naturally brings us to ask whether the studio is thinking about the esports market.

"I'd be a liar if I said we hadn't strongly considered it," Willans replies. "But I'm not a big fan of when people say, 'We're going after esports,' because it's a little bit arrogant. It's more like esports picks you, not the other way round. Sure, we've put stuff in there that we think is compelling, particularly for streamers, and yeah, we are working to a point where we are looking at features even further ahead that will definitely facilitate esports to a greater degree. But it's not our number-one goal."

Still, the foundations CCP Newcastle is building are surely designed to make that much more likely. As *Valkyrie* continues to grow and build an engaged community around a consistently active player base, it may well happen organically. Though Willans won't be drawn any further on the subject, it's clear these VR pioneers still have one eye focussed firmly on the future. "I wouldn't be teasing if I said we're always looking at new technology and even further afield," he says. "The mad scientists are still firmly in the lab, tinkering away with potions. I'll just leave it at that." ■




❶ *Eve Valkyrie* is a much bigger game than it was at launch. "It's been a rollercoaster first year," lead designer Andrew Willans says. "We set ourselves some pretty high standards and we've had a wonderful opportunity with *Valkyrie* over the past year to achieve them."
❷ CCP did much of the technical heavy-lifting on enterprising but flawed shooter *Dust 514*. Its problems lay elsewhere

# PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

## STILL PLAYING

**Mario Kart 8 Deluxe** Switch
Not that we wanted to unlock everything all over again, but there's a curious absence of motivational meat in *Deluxe*'s everything-already-opened design. Yet zipping around this majestic collection of tracks is no less appealing, and the newly introduced battle arenas more than make up for the mode's disappointing Wii U incarnation. Being able to hold two power-ups at once, meanwhile, adds an enjoyable new layer of strategy.

**Bayonetta** PC
Teased on April Fool's Day with a delightful 8bit side-scroller, *Bayonetta*'s surprise leap to PC sets a new standard for the humble remaster, with even the creakiest **Edge** rigs capable of downsampling huge resolutions with nary a dropped frame. The result is now, by a stretch, the definitive edition of Platinum's classic – and publisher Sega is, as we go to press, seemingly teasing a port of Platinum's *Vanquish*, and quite possibly *Bayonetta 3*, too. Be still our beating hearts.

**Destiny** PS4
We don't often head back to Bungie's shared-world shooter these days, but we had our most enjoyable session in months after loading up a playlist of dance-music hits on the PS4's Spotify app. Those stale old patrol missions take on a new lease of life when you're firing to the beat of a '90s trance banger, forbidding yourself from doing anything during breakdowns except staying alive, meleeing into the sky as your Guardian reaches for the lasers. Magical.

## REVIEWED THIS ISSUE






Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Play content

# Press startle

**When you've spent as many years playing games as we have, it's easy to become a little fatigued with widely adopted ideas and design principles. Don't get us wrong: it's great to be able to hop from one game to the next with the minimum of acclimatisation, but it's nice to be surprised sometimes.**

Thank goodness, then, for this month's Play section. Take *Rime* (p102), for example: Tequila Works' enigmatic adventure features no combat, a modest number of puzzles and ambles along at a gentle pace. The studio's contrarian approach is further underscored by its touching approach to collectables, and the fact that the rules and conditions shift throughout. Despite early comparisons to other games, *Rime* mostly feels unfamiliar, and is all the better for it.

*Get Even* (p110) goes further. While The Farm 51 isn't always successful in marrying its dramatic aspirations to memorable game design, *Get Even*'s refusal to conform to a genre, let alone the rules of the genres it mixes together, makes for an enjoyably disorienting experience.



Giant Sparrow's *What Remains Of Edith Finch* (p114) is similarly difficult to classify. *The Unfinished Swan* studio's second narrative adventure initially appears to match our expectations, but quickly shakes off easy pigeon-holing as its various stories are told with dazzling creativity.

All three of these games find innovative ways to tell their stories through play, rather than bolting proven – and possibly ill-suited – design concepts awkwardly onto an existing yarn after the fact. Not that focusing on proven mechanics is necessarily bad, of course. With *The Surge* (p112), Deck13 has built on both its love for the *Souls* games and its previous game, *Lords Of The Fallen*. It doesn't always come together smoothly, but there's plenty to enjoy here even if it's hard not to feel like we've seen it all before.

# Rime

Despite the frosty connotations of its name, *Rime* is a game that exudes warmth. While there are moments of darkness and despair along the way, and cruelty and loss to deal with too, Tequila Works' long-awaited adventure strives to be joyful at every step. It's there in the way you can playfully interact with the spectral fox that serves as your guide throughout, or how baby boar congregate and follow you around whenever you're carrying fruit. It's evident in Tequila Works' diligent efforts to minimise the number of moments where control is taken from you, even during cutscenes. And, of course, it's also provided generously by the simple pleasure of exploring the game's beautiful, mysterious environments.

It nearly didn't turn out this way. Early on during development – a tumultuous gestation that has sometimes overshadowed the game's promise – *Rime* featured hundreds of puzzles, as well as survival aspects that included hunger and thirst meters. It's difficult to imagine how such clutter and stress could have fitted into a game whose final form is so focused and pure. There are vestigial remnants of that busier vision – the fruit that would have driven the survival component remains, for example, but is now nothing more than bait to encourage fully grown boar to smash through thorny barriers – but *Rime* is defined by its relaxed and spacious nature. And even though the game asks nothing more of you than a little explorative curiosity and some basic puzzle-solving nous, it delivers a sprawling, ambitious adventure in return.

Your quest begins after your character, a young boy, washes up on a remote beach. Rust-coloured cliffs loom over you and the crabs that skitter about on the sand, while a crumbling tower perches on a precariously eroded landmass that sits just proud of the island. Moving the left stick prompts the boy to rise, unsteadily, to his feet and then begin limping in whichever direction you choose to point him. Other than the occasional tooltip there's little in the way of guidance or justification, and you're left to gradually uncover the secrets of this enigmatic place.

Before long you'll discover that some objects on the island react to your presence. A button press makes the boy sing or shout, and doing so near anything made of jade will make it resonate. A variety of carvings serve different purposes: flat-headed statues make temporary changes to the environment – briefly raising a platform or opening a door, say – while their portly, round-headed cousins alter the environment permanently; large globes amplify the range of your shout; and still more effigies and mysterious components react in playful ways that we won't spoil here.

This mechanic forms the backbone of many of the game's puzzles. You might have to find a way to light up several statues at once, for example, or manoeuvre an amplifier so that you're able to activate a statue beyond the influence of the boy's small voice. But these metamorphic rock devices are complemented by a number of other magic-infused mechanisms. Viewing platforms that serve as the focal point for perspective puzzles have you lining up fragments of golden statues to form new doorways. Light-sensitive switches activate machinery when bathed in, or starved of, photons. Glowing blue globes must be set on plinths in a certain order to progress. And heavy golden spheres can be rolled around circular grooves to change the time of day.

**Developer** Tequila Works
**Publisher** Grey Box Games
**Format** PC, PS4 (tested), Switch, Xbox One
**Release** Out now

It's difficult to imagine how clutter and stress could have fitted into a game whose final form is so focused and pure



**Despite the variety** of ideas on show, Tequila Works deploys its conundrums sparingly and in such a way that they feel like a natural part of the world rather than contrived gating. While the way forward is often just the other side of an architectural or topographical bottleneck, there's usually plenty of space to stretch your legs and bumble about elsewhere, along with tempting alternative pathways to mine for the game's various collectables and secrets.

Not that any of the puzzles are likely to hold you up for long; while a handful take a little thinking about, none provide a particularly steep challenge. Nor do they represent much of a break in the pace of the game, which moves along in a stubbornly languid manner even when the handful of threats that exist in the game present themselves. There's no combat as such, but on the few occasions that you find yourself in danger there's usually an indirect way to fight back. In one area we're stalked by an aggressive bird and must run between points of cover in order to avoid its talons. The screen tints red the longer we're out of cover, and the creature's unsettling squawks make every dash for safety a stressful endeavour. Later, we must clamber about on sheer cliff faces while avoiding its gaze, but eventually the tables are turned – in this case by solving environmental puzzles whose results make life distinctly uncomfortable for the bird.

All of this takes place in a separate location to the opening island, which was used to show off the game prior to its release. Whereas that opening area is idyllic and welcoming, this second open space is sun-parched, arid and characterised by crumbing sandstone, chalk-white windmills, and glistening golden machinery. It's also vast, taking in a huge beach, a large cliff-top area, a network of tunnels, some building interiors, a beautiful underwater reef amid ruined structures, a deep-set valley, and more besides.

It's perhaps even more ambitious than the first island – a trend that continues with each new location that's revealed. One level toys with your spatial awareness in a manner that makes the now-familiar trick of streaming in a new environment when you're not looking feel magical again. Another takes place in a ▶

RIGHT You'll spot this colossal tower soon after making your way up from the beach. It plays a key role in your journey, and allows you to reach other locations.
BELOW The boy's shout increases the intensity of these torches – a trick that can be used to provide light in particularly gloomy areas.
BOTTOM The game's platforming sections are intricate and on some occasions fraught with danger







ABOVE This huge chunk of jade will send the boy's shout much further than normal. The rather grand view from this tower takes in only a portion of the first island you explore – subsequent locations are just as sprawling



bizarre factory and introduces a fascinating new mechanic as well as one of the game's most rousing moments. They're remarkable spaces to inhabit, and the game flings new ideas and mechanics at you regularly without ever becoming overwhelming. There are times where you can feel wayward – one prolonged period of backtracking had us wondering if we had missed something obvious for longer than was comfortable – and the framerate can dip on occasion, but *Rime*'s world is nevertheless a pleasurable one to explore.

There are occasionally issues with controlling the boy, too. While collision detection is mostly solid, there are moments where the angle of your jump will out-fox whatever algorithms are going on beneath the surface and see you slip from the ledge you planned to grasp. The boy's determinedly relaxed movement speed might also not be to everyone's taste, but you soon get used to the absence of a dash button and adjust to the game's relaxed pacing. And if you *do* slip, there's rarely far to travel; even if a fall results in your death, you'll instantly restart just a few feet from where you tumbled.

The platforming itself is pleasantly physical, the boy's hand-created animation telegraphing what little weight he possesses with satisfying momentum. Grabbable ledges are highlighted by smears of dried-on guano and the boy is a capable climber despite his size, shimmying, dangling, leaping and hauling himself up onto overhangs with only a little effort. The game's dedication to faecal signposting is commendable, but can occasionally lead to bafflement when an unsullied ledge that's perfectly within reach can't be grasped. Even so, the level design never hems you in unfairly, and Tequila has struck a welcoming balance between open-world exploration and gentle funnelling.



**FOX CUES**

Even though you'll spend most of your time alone while exploring, *Rime*'s world is teaming with life. There are crabs on the beach and all manner of fish underwater. Iridescent jellyfish form natural barriers to stop you swimming off into the ocean. Butterflies and warthogs convene around fruit trees. And then there's the unsettling, inhuman presence you'll encounter later on. But your primary company throughout the adventure is a fox that always manages to sit next to the path you should take next, and will bark after a while in case you've missed it. It's an unobtrusive way of rescuing disoriented players that still allows for exploration on their own terms.

**This mysterious hooded figure makes frequent appearances, but always seems to be just out of reach. Given that your fox companion appears to trust them, you can at least be reasonably sure that it's friendly**

Much like *Journey*, in fact, which is the game *Rime* feels most similar to – not, as pre-release hype has suggested, *Ico* or *Wind Waker*. There are moments when Tequila seems to be directly referencing Thatgamecompany's classic, and *Journey* is also evoked in *Rime*'s beautiful score – compositions that are sometimes mournful, sometimes uplifting, and which sit somewhere between a Ghibli soundtrack and Yann Tiersen's work. There's even a mysterious figure in a red cloak who appears intermittently throughout the journey, and stylised murals that serve as tutorials and occasional exposition.

But while there are similarities between the two games, and Tequila's creation is just as beautiful – thematically as well as visually – *Rime* is unquestionably a distinctive, very personal creation. Although it's relatively short, it still feels expansive and exhausting (in a positive sense), culminating in a restrained but powerful conclusion that should move even the most hardened of hearts. It also manages to lend such significance to one branch of its collectable items that we immediately felt the need to dive back into the game and find the ones we'd missed the first time around.

Tequila Works' crisis of faith is understandable but also, it turns out, unfounded. In pairing back its design and focusing on only a few key elements, the studio has created an uncommonly beautiful, open-hearted game. The team's self-deprecation and shaky confidence belies an assured, courageously executed vision. The resulting adventure will give you chills, and should stay with you for a very long time indeed.

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# Post Script

## Kevin Sardà, lead designer and Raúl Rubio, CEO and creative director, Tequila Works

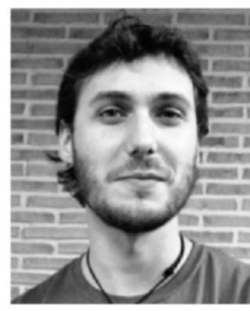
*Rime* has emerged from its prolonged, fraught development – the story of which we charted in **E305** – every bit as special as early glimpses suggested it would be. Here, lead designer **Kevin Sardà** (right, top) and Tequila Works CEO and creative director **Raúl Rubio** discuss the relief of reaching the end of their journey, and the remarkable attention to detail lavished on *Rime*'s world. Spoilers follow.

**After everything you've been through, are you happy with the finished game?**
**Kevin Sardà** It's a really personal project, and everybody has their own hopes and dreams for it. But Raúl is the person that is closest to it.
**Raúl Rubio** I'm relieved we've finished it and I'm very happy for my team and what we have achieved together.

**Do you have any regrets?**
**RR** The only regret is the costumes; we wanted them to have extra powers – like letting you breathe underwater – but it broke the game. It wasn't fun in the end.

**With the kid's toys, you've made collectables feel worthwhile. Was that your specific intention?**
**KS** For us, adding collectables was a way of rewarding players who want to explore or try different things. We didn't want it to be like, 'Collect 1,000 seashells', just so you can get an achievement. We also had a lot to explain, because there are no words at all in the game, and all of that is scattered among the collectables. We had to be creative, because we couldn't have any upgrades whatsoever. We couldn't have an economy system or just scatter money around the game, because players aren't going to be able to buy weapons or a double jump. So all the different tricks that are normally used had no place in our game. In the end, we tried to use that as a strength, instead of a weakness.
**RR** Usually collectables are something you need by design, like Kevin says. But for us it was more like a dance between narrative and design. You will have noticed that the whole game is basically a narrative that is being played out – in the end it was something that helped us a lot to be able to create more elements for the story, but we feel really proud that the collectables are something that complement the game.

**The toys lend huge power to the game's conclusion.**
**RR** Believe it or not, we had people crying in the studio. It's strange – that ending works because you project yourself into the situation. So it's different for many different people.
**KS** We were all crying, even when we were only watching the animatic!


Kevin Sardà


Raúl Rubio

"We were all crying, even when we were only watching the animatic"



**The way you play with geometry and navigation in Bargaining is intriguing. How did you approach that?**
**KS** It was really hard to turn all of that mystery, and the breaking of rules, into mechanics. But it was also really important we succeeded. The game starts as one thing, but slowly transforms into something else – and we had to do that gradually otherwise the player would feel cheated. With every space we had a clear theme, and there are a bunch of ideas in there – in Bargaining, the player has to help other characters if they want their help in return, but things aren't what they look like.
**RR** Sometimes we went too far, though. At one point in Bargaining we had Escher-inspired mechanics where you were walking on the ceiling and you could see your reflection and go to a parallel universe where everything wasn't perfect. But it was really difficult to play. All the playtesters got lost and couldn't navigate it at all. It turns out that your mind can understand an Escher painting, but you can't be *in* an Escher world. So that's why we decided to apply non-Euclidean level design.

**The way you change gameplay and environmental rules is a bold yet risky move. Did that worry you?**
**KS** Yes! Normally when you start a game, you're told what you have to do, and you have to do that for the rest of the game. You get it straight away, and the game just keeps getting harder. It's a good way of making a game, but it wasn't our way. Firstly because of the nature of the story, every stage has its own theme and feeling. But also, we wanted the player to feel lost, which was the key to piquing curiosity. And that curiosity is what drives you forward, because no one is telling you that you have to save the world, or rescue a princess. It was a risky gamble, but it was our vision from the beginning.

**There is remarkable attention to detail in the level design. How much of a challenge was that?**
**KS** There are many things that are there for a reason, but most people are never going to find. In the Anger stage, for example, there are three windmills: the windmill of the sea, which is flooded; the windmill of the boat, which is made of pieces of broken vessels because the boat was not good enough to protect the kid; and the windmill of the kid, because he was reckless. In the centre of everything, the bird's nest is shaped like the figure of the father. The bird represents his anger, and as you prevent the bird from flying near each windmill, that anger is redirected. Once you have nothing else left to blame, the anger can't go anywhere else – the whole island, and the storm, turns against the father and you have to blame yourself. It's never explained, but for us it's important to place this information everywhere. ■

# Prey

Should there be any lingering doubt that Arkane is the inheritor of the immersive sim, *Prey* puts it to rest. This ambitious sci-fi shooter captures the spirit of *System Shock* in the same way the *Dishonored* series takes after *Thief*. It's a modern expression of an aspirational school of FPS design: the sort that gives you a set of tools, an intimidating foe, a mystery to solve, and the freedom to solve it in your own way.

As scientist Morgan Yu, you explore a translunar space station called Talos I in the aftermath of an attack by an extraterrestrial force, the Typhon. These shadowy creatures can, in their most basic form, mimic inanimate matter, an idea that encapsulates many of *Prey*'s best qualities. It's an inventive and well-implemented sci-fi concept that encourages creativity in the player. *Prey*'s well-paced introduction teaches you to apply real-world logic to the otherworldly challenge you face: if it seems unlikely a small office cubicle would have two desk chairs, one of them probably isn't what it seems.

*Prey*'s headier ideas are built on top of a strong basic simulation. Physical objects have weight and interact with one another and the environment in believable ways, fuel pipes rupture to create jets of flame, and EMP blasts short out electrical equipment. You're quickly given a gun that fires rapidly hardening blobs of glue, which can be used to pin enemies, create blockades, and build staircases. This is the first in a series of tools that enable more and more elaborate eureka moments – instances when you circumvent obstacles using your own creativity rather than prescribed game logic. In another game, the presence of a nerf crossbow that fires utterly non-lethal foam bolts would be a joke. Here it's just another tool, a means for distracting creatures, setting off proximity-triggered mines, or testing the veracity of a suspicious-looking ammo pack.

Morgan's skillset can be expanded by installing Neuromods – memories recorded from master athletes, engineers and scientists and distilled into a form that can be injected into a new host. Initially, these follow relatively terrestrial upgrade paths: engineering, hacking, crafting, combat. Later, you're given a scanner that allows you to harvest data from living Typhon and appropriate their powers for yourself. This is where *Prey* comes alive. You can learn to mimic inanimate objects to sneak into rooms in the guise of a roll of tape, animate corpses to fight on your behalf, or create gravity wells that suspend objects and enemies in the air.

While some upgrades are less exciting than others – nobody is going to be thrilled to halve fire damage – the satisfaction of *Prey*, as with *Dishonored*, is the way the logic of all of these different elements fits together. The downside is the way your Neuromod decisions lock you into an approach. *Prey* suits repeat play, but even so it'd be well served by giving the player more freedom to experiment in the span of a single run.

**Developer** Arkane
**Publisher** Bethesda Softworks
**Format** PC (tested), PS4, Xbox One
**Release** Out now

If it seems unlikely a small office cubicle would have two desk chairs, one of them probably isn't what it seems



As in *Dishonored*, *Prey* pairs systemic complexity with phenomenal art direction. Talos I is the product of an alternate timeline where Kennedy's assassination failed and the space race never halted, and as such its 2030s corridors are infused with '70s design sensibility. Flatscreen computers inspired by old architectural drafting boards sit in offices panelled in ochre wood and trimmed with gold. *Bioshock*'s influence is felt throughout – not least in those Neuromod injectors – but Talos I is a far more believable space than Rapture.

After a relatively linear introduction, *Prey* opens up substantially. Talos I's various sections are gated off, but for every area that you're introduced to along the critical path there's another waiting to be discovered in your own time. The survival-horror overtures of your first tentative encounters with the Typhon give way to more confident engagement later on, when you have the gear and expertise to take on tougher foes directly. At this point *Prey* becomes more of an improvisational action game than a survival horror, and your interest shifts to the game's well-conceived central mystery.

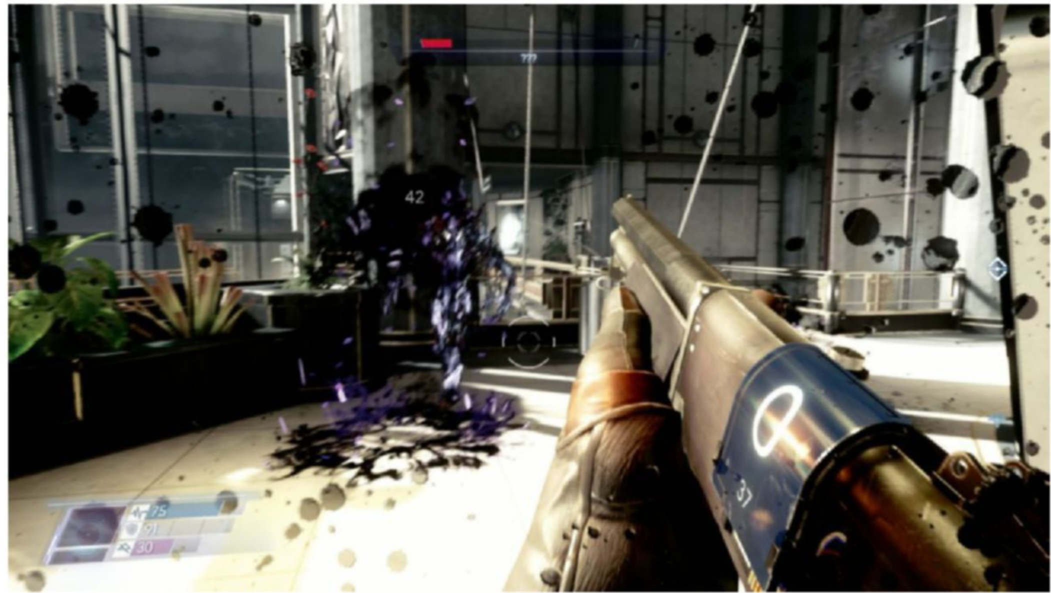
**But the degree** of improvisational freedom that *Prey* provides comes at a cost. Arkane has attempted to anticipate all the ways in which you might circumvent challenges or solve problems out of sequence, but it's still possible – even likely – that you'll encounter issues due to the freedom you're given. This includes discovering new enemies or environments in a way the designers didn't expect, which is less impactful than if you had approached the game the 'right' way. You can sometimes get the better of the quest system, too. While Arkane laudably allows you to skip ahead in quests if you perform the right actions or find the right items of your own accord, it'll fill in Morgan's journal as if you'd done the steps you missed. This risks making you nervous about expressing your agency, and in a few rare cases your choices are simply ignored. Given *Prey*'s best moments come when you play creatively, these rough edges prevent the game from reaching its full potential.

The alien nature of the Typhon conceals some AI flaws, too. They can struggle to pursue you across anything other than open terrain, and it can often be hard to predict how they'll move or what they can see. While much of this is justified in the plot, it does weaken *Prey* as a pure stealth and combat game. When you're using a nerf dart to detonate a matter-recycling singularity in the midst of a group of prowling shadow-creatures, you won't care. When you're in a straight-up shotgun fight, you will.

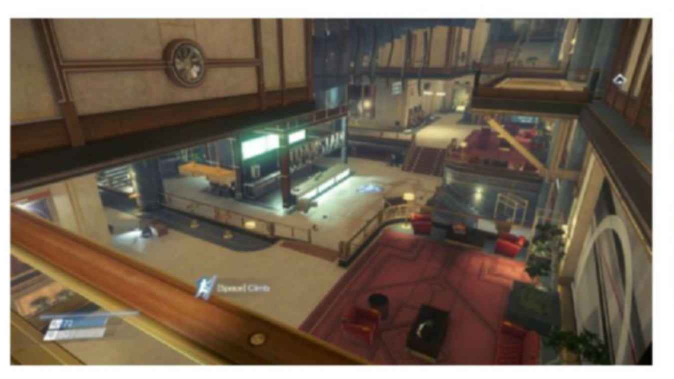
Despite these issues, *Prey* is an accomplished game in an under-served genre. Its problems are those of a game that tries to do more, and give the player more, than most shooters aspire to – and to that extent, they're forgivable.

**8**

**ABOVE** The Gloo gun is a powerful weapon against mimics. Sustained fire will freeze them before they can attack, and if you can trap it while it's disguised then you can prevent it from transforming.
**RIGHT** Encounters with larger Typhon are initially tough and require planning and preparation. Later, your own powers will be close to a match for theirs

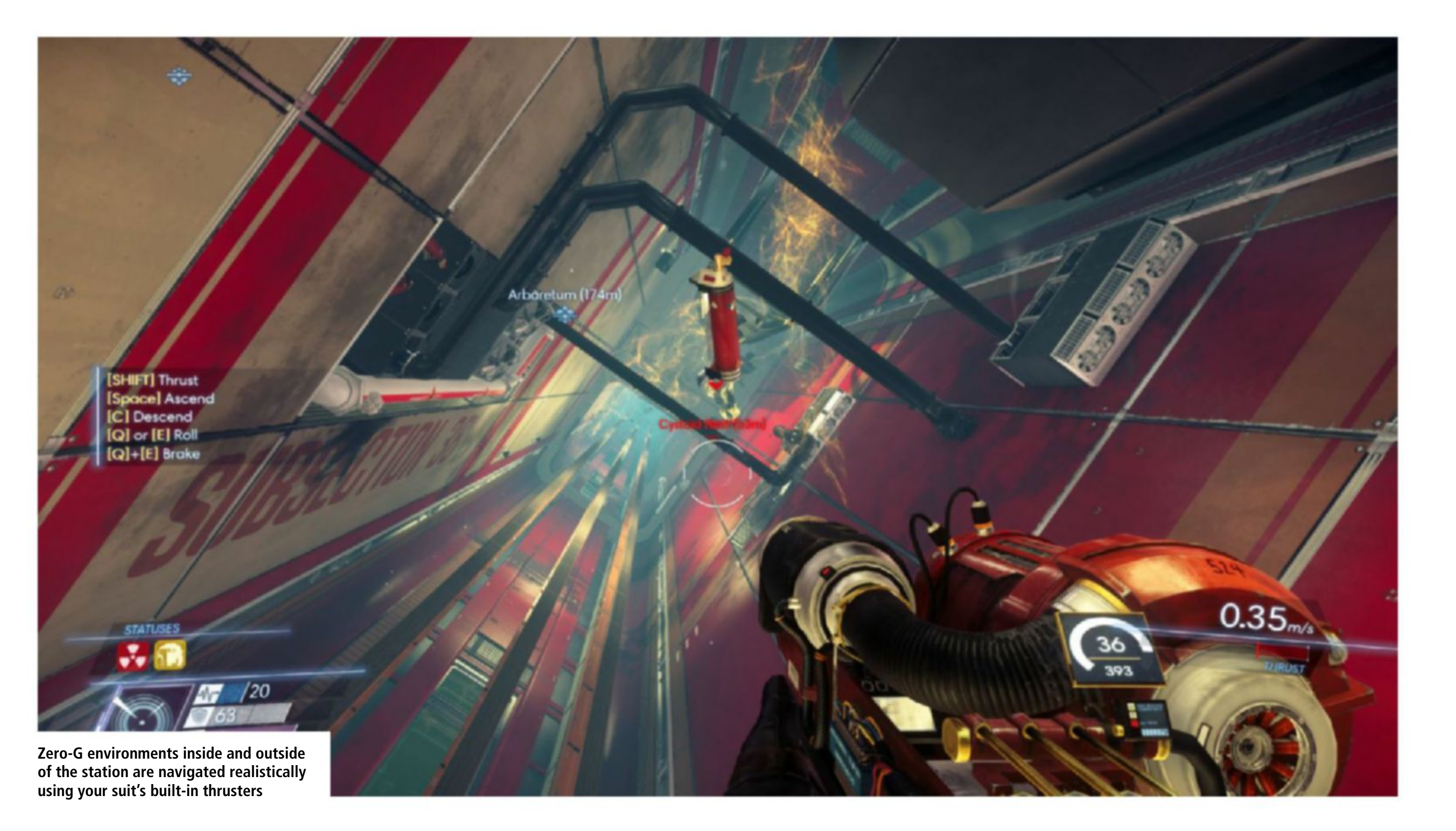


**BELOW** Talos I is divided into large, open-plan decks that can be approached in dozens of different ways. While tracking down keycards to bypass security is a valid approach, more creative solutions are often possible





**ABOVE** Neuromods are injected via eye socket – a gruesome escalation of *Bioshock*'s plasmid injectors. Thankfully, you only have to experience it once. After that, it's a matter of investing Neuromod points on the skill menu ▶




Zero-G environments inside and outside of the station are navigated realistically using your suit's built-in thrusters

# Post Script

## Through the Looking Glass

*Prey* is infused with respect for the videogames that inspired it. The immersive-sim genre has always generated an unusually devotional following in both players and developers, and that reverence is evident throughout Talos I. The station's holographic-messaging technology is accessed through 'looking glass' terminals – a not-so-subtle nod to Looking Glass, the creator of the original *System Shock* games. Meanwhile, early on, 0451, the '*Deus Ex* code', shows up on a crucial keypad.

Given the shared DNA between Looking Glass, Ion Storm, Irrational and Arkane, there is a sense of a small group of developers getting better and better at making a specific game for a larger and larger set of players. *Prey* is, without a doubt, a *System Shock* successor – but not unthinkingly so. It has an eye for accessibility that the intricate shooters of the late '90s never considered, and original art direction that transcends the sci-fi/cyberpunk pastiche common to both of the original *Shock* games and *Deus Ex*. Its script is better written, and better performed, as a consequence of decades of advancement in the standard of storytelling across the industry at large.

It's to Bethesda's credit that the publisher has, in *Prey*, *Dishonored* and MachineGames' new *Wolfenstein* series, given skilled designers the resources and freedom to reclaim and reimagine so much of the legacy of the '90s PC shooter. These are games that have always seemed to be in the process of being discovered; indeed, *Prey*'s luckiest player is the one for who these experiences are completely new, for whom the thrill of solving a problem through initiative and creativity, rather than designer-mandated Simon Says, changes the way they think about games. For those who have been playing these games for decades, the feeling is more like relief: thank God they're still making these, and making them well.

The elephant in the room, of course, is *Prey* – not this one, but the game to which this is ostensibly a successor. Arkane's *Prey* arrives 11 years after Human Head began the 'series' with its own *Prey*, which was itself in development for 11 years. That first *Prey* had its origins in 3D Realms and *Duke Nukem*, tying it to an entirely different branch of the shooter family tree. In its earliest appearances it was touted as the next big thing in the genre (a dubious honour it shares with Ion Storm's disastrous *Daikatana*) only to have the rug swept out from under it by the emergence of a studio called Valve and a game named *Half-Life*. The *Prey* that emerged in 2006 wore Valve's influence openly, a linear, narrative-heavy FPS with increasingly high-concept sci-fi set-pieces.

Human Head's cancelled *Prey 2* starred a human bounty hunter who stalked alien cities inspired by Star Wars and Blade Runner. After years of work Bethesda transferred the game from Human Head to Arkane, before cancelling *Prey 2* and giving Arkane free reign to do what it wished with the title. Arkane chose to make *System Shock*. "These images remain as a reminder of what might have been," read the words accompanying a small set of *Prey 2* screenshots on a bare page on Human Head's website. "Human Head Studios crafted a game we remain quite proud of."

It would be a stretch to say that this new *Prey* owes much to Human Head's work. Both games concern an alien attack and both are shooters, but that's not much to go on in the game industry. The decision to call the game *Prey*, then, is odd – a purely symbolic act of branding, a reboot of a series that wasn't tremendously popular in the first place which retains almost nothing of the original. People who were playing shooters in the late noughties are more likely to think of Arkane's *Prey* as a successor to *Bioshock* than the game whose name it shares. So the question remains: why call it *Prey*? Perhaps it's simple: *System Shock 3* was taken. ■

# Get Even

**Developer** The Farm 51
**Publisher** Bandai Namco Entertainment
**Format** PC (tested), PS4, Xbox One
**Release** Out now

There has been much confusion, in the lead up to *Get Even*'s release, as to what it actually is. The Farm 51's debut has been described variously as a firstperson shooter, a horror game, and – to use the studio's own label – a psychological thriller. The finished game avoids firm categorisation, blending aspects from a number of genres as the studio picks and chooses the mechanics that best tell its dark story about loss, guilt and revenge. The result is a game that is particularly successful at evoking the gritty, disorienting atmosphere of the films that inspired it (a list that includes Kill List, Memento and Oldboy), even if it isn't always as good at providing enjoyment.

Throughout the game, amnesiac protagonist Cole Black is held in an asylum and forced to relive memories dredged up by an experimental VR device called the Memory Visualisation Headset (also known by its slightly snappier codename, Pandora). By looking at certain photos, Black can dive into latent memories and try to recall what happened as he wrestles with the guilt he feels about a botched hostage-rescue attempt. A shadowy figure, known only as Red, orchestrates the whole thing, communicating via TV screens dotted about the institution and insisting this rather traumatic process is a treatment for which Black volunteered.

The prototype headset struggles to simulate realistic human behaviour (conveniently explaining the fuzzy AI), so killing people or going off script while in a memory will destabilise it. The consequences for doing so are hardly severe – a terse dressing down from Red, perhaps, and a subtle change to the way some story events subsequently play out – but you'll still feel guilty if you pull the trigger. The Farm 51 toys with this tension, appealing to your sense of morality while at the same time tempting you with the prospect of combat. In between these moments you'll solve puzzles, explore environments and gather evidence, try to glean wider context from news clippings and police reports, and interact with a cast of highly unstable fellow patients.

The Farm 51's decision to never settle on any particular playstyle ensures that *Get Even* retains its ability to surprise right up until the end. Pleasingly, it also means that the twisting storyline is reflected in the game's mechanics. One moment you might be sneaking through an underground car park trying to avoid the red vision cones of a surprisingly diverse British security detail; the next, you'll be doing a spot of light plumbing as you try to get hot water through a series of valves using an infrared camera; later, you'll be cowering in the dank bowels of a decaying asylum, flanked by glass-eyed mannequins, which appear to change position whenever you look away.

None of the game's varied selection of activities stand out as particularly groundbreaking in isolation, but most acquit themselves well. However, in cherry-picking components that provide ways to spin a yarn, as opposed to building mechanics for the sake of play, the game's focus always feels like it's on the bigger picture as opposed to the minute-to-minute experience. The end result is, despite the name, uneven.

Puzzles, too, can feel perfunctory, each requiring you to make use of one of your phone's various apps to reveal the solution. They're not intended to hold you up, instead existing as simple – and occasionally surprisingly moving – components in a branching story that often provide an opportunity for you to choose between playing an impassive or impulsive hero. You might decide to shoot a lock off a door, say, rather than fiddle with valves to shut off the jet of steam venting into a crawlspace. That the solutions are rarely gratifying is an unfortunate side effect.

The game's focus always feels like it's on the bigger picture as opposed to the minute-to-minute experience



**MIND PALACE**
As you play through each memory, everything you collect along the way – including clippings, reports, hand-written notes, schematics and audio diaries – is collated on a cork board inside a sort of virtual operations room devised by Red. Each memory has its own board on which all of the relevant articles are pinned, with connections between them denoted by a piece of string. Later on, you'll be able to replay memories to try to discover any vital missing evidence or information, and perhaps tackle them with force instead of stealth the second time around.

**Yet one thing** at which *Get Even* excels is building atmosphere. A great deal of this is thanks to sound designer and composer Olivier Deriviere's exceptional soundtrack, which contorts itself around the action to an unusual degree. Black's breathing becomes part of the rhythm of a track at one point; samples and stems rise and fall in the mix depending on which parts of the environment you're looking at, and the drone of a stomach-turning bass note reaches deeper in step with your own descent through the guts of a building. It's a stirring accompaniment to an ambitious storyline.

It's a pity that the environments in which all of this takes place aren't as indelible. Perhaps it's a deliberate choice: the story, after all, explores the consequences of misremembering, and how distinct memories can be conflated into some new, inaccurate haze. But the samey environments feel more like a poor aesthetic choice than a clever reflection of the game's themes. While the photogrammetry-captured locations take in graveyards, abandoned buildings, modern labs and more, the game's pervasive desaturated colour palette and nondescript locales conspire to make them feel indistinct.

There are issues with pacing, too. Switching between so many styles results in a staccato journey in terms of mechanics, even if the story itself is intriguing enough to keep you on edge. It slightly overstays its welcome, and feels less taut by the end, but that doesn't take away from the powerful conclusion. The decision to lock off one of The Farm 51's best gameplay ideas in the epilogue rankles a little, however.

The result is a game that, while built from familiar components, feels unique as a whole. The Farm 51 should be commended for its bold design decisions, and for attempting to create something that dispenses with videogame conventions. That it doesn't always hang together quite as well as it could is disappointing, but that doesn't make experiencing the studio's singular vision any less worthwhile.

**6**

RIGHT The UV light on your phone reveals hidden messages and blood stains, as well as functioning as a replacement for a standard torch. MAIN Combat feels good for the most part, but the game's AI lets the side down. Voice acting is, at least, excellent throughout. BOTTOM Gathering evidence is a key part of the game, and your grasp of the events that led up to your incarceration will be called upon in the late stages of the game









ABOVE Stealth sections are made easier by your phone's remarkable ability to show where enemies are looking. You can perform stealth takedowns, but it will still count as a kill, and therefore potentially affect the memory

# The Surge

Just as they did with Deck13's previous game, *Lords Of The Fallen*, some people will sneer at *The Surge* for daring to poke around in the same corners as the hallowed *Dark Souls* series. But the studio clearly reveres FromSoftware's work, and once you've accepted its motives – that these games are more exercises in worship than they are duplicitous clones – you can try to appreciate *The Surge* on its own merit. What you cannot do, though, is play it without drawing comparisons to the games that inspired it, because there is no escaping the familiarity in its structure and systems. Sometimes it's a familiarity that feels comforting, but it can also be a nagging sensation that makes you stop and simply ponder what a sci-fi *Dark Souls* would be like with Hidetaka Miyazaki at the helm.

The futuristic set dressing works hard to make *The Surge* feel like its own game, and in full flight, shafts of light rolling across your armour as you hustle through cramped service corridors stuffed with cabling and studded with minimalistic signposting, it forges an atmosphere that keeps you wanting to see more. In rooting the game in hard, functional angles across its assorted industrial zones, however, Deck13 runs into navigation issues, and in a small number of sections it's all too easy to feel lost, circling back on yourself as you grasp hopelessly for standout environmental aspects to guide your way. An intentional choice by designers looking to make the game more challenging, or simply an oversight? Even if it's the former, it probably wasn't meant to feel quite this infuriating in play.

Or perhaps we were simply going at it too hard. *The Surge*'s rhythms – run the gauntlet of a bunch of enemies as you explore an environment, collecting goodies and healing your way to the safe point, inching your progress along with each new excursion – are so familiar now that they invite overconfidence. On too many occasions we bundled our way into enemy encounters assured that we had the measure of things, only to immediately have our head stoved in, stranding our scrap quota – *The Surge*'s equivalent of souls – for recovery on the subsequent run. The game is smaller than its stylings lead you to expect, so it makes sense that the obstacles in your way put up a fight.

It explains the game's Metroidvania leanings, too. Gear-gated doorways appear from the opening section onwards, dangling the prospect of hidden delights that at some point, if you work really hard, you may be able to get your hands on. In some instances it is worth backtracking to collect a valuable health powerup, but we're not sure we'll ever forgive the designer who opted to tease us with a level-55 doorway in the opening stage that, many hours later, coughs up a pointless audio log.

In moment-to-moment terms, a more important departure from the *Souls* template is the game's targeting system, which allows you to aim attacks at an enemy's head, body or individual limb. An unprotected noggin is a good target if you want to take an enemy down quickly, but at other times you'll want to pinpoint an arm or leg in order to procure a weapon, or some armour, that can then be upgraded with other materials harvestable in the same manner. It adds a layer of strategy that feels gimmicky at first before eventually emerging as a mechanic that holds up to sustained play, pitting risk against reward smoothly and gratifyingly.

**The Surge's approach** to bosses is less satisfying. Its opening example is predictable enough, but with its second it starts cooking. It can clonk you with a downward slap from one of its six arms. It can roast you with multiple flamethrowers up close, or lob a blob of blue flame at you from distance. It can whip you with its arms by rotating like a churning spinning top, first horizontally and then at an incline. It can launch itself into the air and land its circular bulk on your head, or perform a body slam to crush you if you try to scutter under its belly. It is, in other words, a handful – at least until you learn its moveset – and it stokes the fires as you contemplate the kind of monstrosities that lie in wait farther into the adventure. That the next boss fails to deliver the goods is a disappointment, but it's not as crushing as the subsequent set-piece, which opens an enormous door only to wheel out a reskinned version of the game's first boss – and then, while you're still coming to terms with such a dirty move, repeats the trick once more, just to rub it in. There's just one more boss to tick off the list before the game is done, making a total of five climactic encounters in an adventure whose stablemates manage to crank out that quota by lunchtime. The canvas of a fantasy-themed game may allow designers more freedom to express themselves, but we've seen enough incredible mechanised foes down the years to know that *The Surge* is a missed opportunity. The game leans into a biomechanical theme as it enters its closing phase, and it only emphasises the lack of imagination in earlier sections.

Since it's framed by a predictable storyline and mediocre scripting, *The Surge* falls back on its sights, sounds and mechanics to get by. Its lighting and audio effects serve the theme well, but it's scruffier technically: some enemies ignored us completely, while others had a weird habit of simply running off in the opposite direction. (A day-one patch may yet fix some of these issues.) There are some odd design choices, too: the game retains the regenerating enemies of the *Souls* series, but it doesn't include fast travel or a way of purchasing upgrade materials, which prolongs the adventure in a not particularly rewarding way.

FromSoftware's second stab at this stuff produced *Dark Souls*. Deck13 still has a way to go before it really delivers on the concept it holds so dear.

**6**

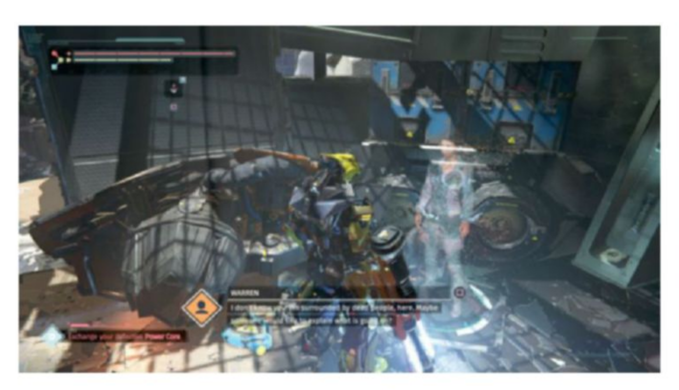
**Developer** Deck13 Interactive
**Publisher** Focus Home Interactive
**Format** PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
**Release** Out now

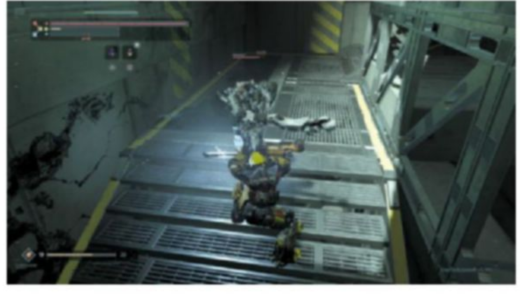
While you're still coming to terms with such a dirty move, it repeats the trick once more, just to rub it in



**SLOT MACHINES**

Rather than offering the usual categories – Strength, Dexterity, etc – to level up as you progress, *The Surge* builds its character progression around the mechanised rigs you wear throughout. Each has a number of slots that can be filled with enhancements spread across various categories, from life- and stamina-bar extenders to weapon modifiers and all-important health injectables. The twist is that it's not simply a matter of filling empty slots: each implant has its own cost, which is deducted from your level total. The impetus, then, is to not only extend your slot quota (by acquiring a new rig or extending the range of your existing one) but also to think about what you *really* need at any given point. It is an entirely successful spin on the concept of a build in this type of game, resulting in an absorbing juggling act from start to finish.





ABOVE There are no shields, but you can block with weapons, which in certain instances opens counter windows. The lack of ranged options (your drone's piddly laser aside) ensures that every encounter is personal



TOP Each level contains a single safe area where you can level up your rig and kit. NPCs also turn up in these places once you've met them in their starting positions, providing simple conversation and the occasional fetch quest. ABOVE Protagonist Warren enters the game in a wheelchair, but the rig technology gives him the power to walk, and a lot more besides. It fits perfectly into a handsomely rendered world that comes to life through evocative lighting effects. RIGHT Drone enemies provide mosquito-like annoyance, but occasionally work in tandem with larger enemies to bolster the hosts' abilities. Your own drone accompanies you throughout, and proves useful for baiting enemies into positions where you can conveniently smash them into pieces without provoking others



# What Remains Of Edith Finch

Just as the label 'walking simulator' has been adopted by the developers (and players) it was coined to disparage, Giant Sparrow's second game shows an eagerness to avoid being pigeonholed as such. Yes, there's some walking involved in this lean, yet rangy, narrative adventure. But, as the developer proves in a bravura early sequence, *What Remains Of Edith Finch* is equally happy to be a pouncing, swooping, rolling, swimming and slithering sim. If occasionally ungainly in execution, it's dazzlingly conceived, and an exhilarating early sign of great things to come.

This might not be the game you're expecting, then, but there's no bait-and-switch here. It's not a character study pretending to be a mystery thriller, nor a family drama masquerading as a horror. It's admirably plain about its intentions from the outset. As the young woman of the title, you revisit your family home in rural Washington State after your mother's death, intending to satisfy your curiosity about the other Finches who have passed, and to examine the idea that a curse is causing them to die before their time.

It's a macabre conceit, and the house itself does little to dispel early suggestions that we might be in for a scare or two. It's an eccentric piece of architecture that looks relatively normal on the ground floor but gets progressively stranger the further up you go. On one side, you'll see a crooked tower of rooms built on top of one another, precariously perched on a tree jutting out from what was once the top floor.

Inside, however, there's little to be afraid of. There's nothing abnormal, beyond a surplus of clutter. Tins of salmon are stacked up in the kitchen, while busy walls are covered in plaques and paintings, and candles are liberally scattered throughout the house. And books are everywhere: piled up on shelves, lining the sides of the staircase, or crammed above an arched doorway.

But then this is a house full of stories, the most important of which are still under lock and key. Edith's mother, Dawn, has sealed up the bedrooms of the departed in an apparent attempt to confine the hoodoo, which has transformed the Finch house into something of a mausoleum. It's a contrivance that makes the place more fun to explore, an intricate puzzle box of hidden passages and crawlspaces offering alternative entry points to areas that serve as hermetically preserved memorials. Each room's decor might offer a semblance of its former inhabitant, but we get a fuller picture of the person when Edith examines a letter or memento and we experience a brief taste of their life.

In less capable hands, this could be horribly maudlin or ghoulish. In Giant Sparrow's, it's anything but. The developer doesn't downplay the tragedies, but these interactive flashbacks are frequently playful, surprising, and occasionally even blackly funny. This game makes you more than just a passive observer of past events; instead, you're afforded a fleeting opportunity to inhabit these poor unfortunates before they die. Yes, you're essentially marching them towards their deaths in many cases, but with their fates already determined, it's a chance to see the world as they did. Constantly shifting storytelling methods also help prevent Edith's journey from becoming a gloomy wallow in melancholia. An older ancestor's tale is told through the images of a View-Master reel, while a child star's fall from grace is captured in the panels of a dime-store comic, and accompanied by an iconic movie theme that's flawlessly deployed. There are plenty of inventive flourishes besides, the discovery of which we'll leave unspoiled.

Perhaps more significantly, these diverse narrative techniques aren't simply variety for variety's sake, but are also an attempt to communicate meaning through interaction. Your inputs are always in service of the story; likewise, the shifts in perspective. Even the simplest activities are delightfully tactile, whether you're winding a music box, pulling a handle, or even just nudging the stick to close Edith's journal once a scenario has reached its inevitable conclusion.

**It's clear Giant** Sparrow has invested great care and thought in how best to tell these stories, rather than setting the player perfunctory objectives tangentially related to the plot. On a base level, you're still exploring an empty environment, but here you're doing much more than simply following a paper trail or listening to surrogate audio logs. It's a game that involves you more directly in its storytelling, and it envelops you all the more deeply as a result.

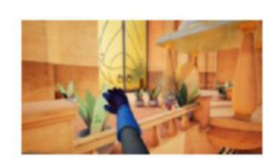
And, to use that reclaimed catch-all, this is one walking sim that doesn't drag its feet. Edith's poignant narration (half curious, half resigned) is overlaid on the environment, gently guiding you through, while bright glows on key items draw your eye, ensuring you're never left wondering what to do or where to go next. Some stories are over in a heartbeat; others last longer, but these are novellas, not sagas. Even so, by the bittersweet ending, you'll feel like you've travelled farther and discovered more than in games five times the length.

There's no escaping that this will, for some, be an emotionally demanding game. But it says much that even the most potentially upsetting sequence is handled in almost celebratory fashion. As Edith herself implies in a late-game voiceover, a person's passing is not just a time to grieve, but an opportunity to commemorate their life – or even to appreciate the miracle of existence. It's a sentimental thought that informs a remarkable, big-hearted game from a developer whose debut gave barely a hint of the storytelling confidence and poise on show here. *What Remains Of Edith Finch* is anything but unfinished; it might even set a new benchmark for the narrative adventure.

**9**

**Developer** Giant Sparrow
**Publisher** Annapurna Interactive
**Format** PC, PS4 (version tested)
**Release** Out now

By the ending, you'll feel like you've travelled farther and discovered more than in games five times the length

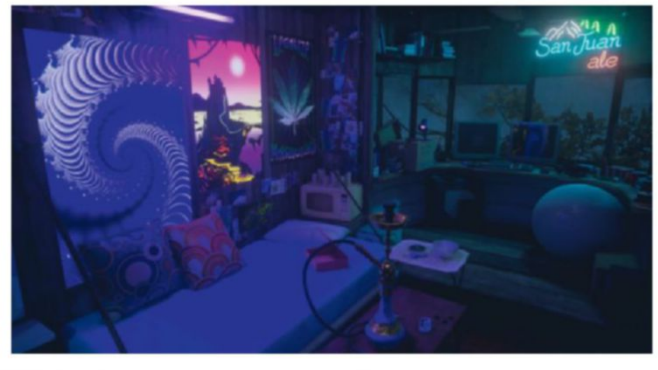


**DIGITAL FLOUNDERING**
While the game mostly avoids busywork, you will have to perform a repetitive menial task during one of the stories. It's a risky move, but it proves an ingenious exemplar of Giant Sparrow's thoughtful synthesis of presentation and systems. It involves some manual labour, executed with movements of the right stick. The process soon becomes second nature, but once it does, your left hand is suddenly given something to do, as the character in question drifts away into a flight of fancy, and you're asked to manoeuvre an avatar while continuing with your job. With your right hand falling into a consistent rhythm, you're able to focus more intently on the left, cleverly mirroring the moment its subject's imagination begins to take over, and the real world gradually disappears.





ABOVE Text is used expressively throughout the game's runtime, from a kite sweeping away lines of poetry to letters floating from a dandelion clock. Each individual voice within the game gets its own typeface






MAIN Edith adds a sketch to the family tree in her journal after each family member's story is completed – and once you've finished the game, you can highlight their portraits to replay individual tales. Barbara's will likely be one of the more popular choices.
ABOVE The rooms might be empty, but they feel anything but lifeless, thanks to a combination of artful detail and lighting, complemented by Edith's own narration. You don't need to be a rocket scientist to guess the "familiar smell" she refers to when looking around brother Lewis' room.
LEFT The sheer volume of objects in any given room is admirable given the size of the development team, though you may wish more yielded to your presence. You could argue, of course, that Edith would want to leave the house as she found it

# Strafe

One of the joys of 2016's *Doom* reboot was discovering remnants of the original game lodged beneath its crust: hidden areas mocked up to resemble id Tech 1 maps, with splintered wall textures, 2D sprites and flattened lighting. *Strafe* prompts similar emotions, at a glance. An accomplished Unity shooter from film-industry veterans Thom Glunt and Stephen Raney, it's flamboyantly modelled on the projectile-dodging and vertical design of *Doom*'s younger sibling *Quake*, and saturated with gleeful references to the '90s at large.

Practically every prop or effect is a piece of memorabilia. Certain exit doors grind apart to the peal of a dial-up modem. Crates pop open under fire to reveal N64 carts and floppy disks, buried in Styrofoam packing noodles. The weapons are boxy and brutish, encompassing chainguns, shotguns, rocket launchers and disc throwers (none of which permit aiming down the sights). The enemies are a familiar blend of swarming skirmishers and ranged attackers who spit projectiles at different velocities – the one designed to force you back, the other to keep you hopping sideways in a frenzied ballet that requires you to form a precise mental map of the terrain you can't see.

However, *Strafe* does more than merely ape a few well-known layouts or tools of destruction. It is, in fact, one genre viewed through the lens of another, the Roguelike – its 12 stages, three per themed zone, procedurally generated from a library of pre-designed chambers, including canyons littered with spacecraft wreckage, L-shaped hallways lined with treacherous sliding partitions, and tasteful corporate hideouts that conjure up dim memories of *GoldenEye*.

The arsenal may evoke *Quake*'s adolescent excess – there isn't a gun in this game that can't rip something's head clean off – but the campaign structure recalls *Spelunky*'s balance of strategy, guesswork and the pressures of the moment, pitting randomised enemy and loot distribution against recurring opportunities like the dancing robot vendors who always appear in certain stages. If the terrain varies, each stage also adheres to its own broad script or theme. You might have to recover key cards and fight your way back to a door past waves of reinforcements, for example, or destroy obstructions using a reactor core that counts down to detonation on pick-up.

*Strafe* isn't as ripe with potential for surprises and reversals as *Spelunky*, nor are its spliced-together layouts a match for the best *Quake* or *Doom* levels. But it does manage something quietly revolutionary: a credible automation of the thinking that gave us maps like Gloom Keep or The Door To Chthon, capable of thousands of variations. The components do become familiar after a few runs, but each layout creates a different challenge depending on how you move through it. You might have to climb a spiral staircase instead of descend it, for example, or dodge bullets along a narrow walkway rather than duelling in the arena below.

**Developer** Pixel Titans
**Publisher** Devolver Digital
**Format** PC (tested), PS4
**Release** Out now

> The campaign structure recalls Spelunky's balance of strategy, guesswork and the pressures of the moment




**LONG SHOT**
As with *Spelunky*, *Strafe*'s inherent replayability is bolstered by a daily challenge option (for example, complete a run using only the shotgun) and speedrun leaderboards (a successful playthrough should last a little over an hour), all accessed via a lovingly crafted DOS boot-up screen complete with command-line inputs. There's also a wave survival arena mode, Murderzone, though no competitive multiplayer at the time of writing – a shame given how well the game approximates the agility and frenzy of *Quake*, but forgivable given the team's modest size and resources. Pixel Giants has a wealth of ideas for post-release content: it plans to add Oculus Rift functionality in the first instance, and is keeping an open mind on mod support.

Certain enemy varieties shape the terrain chemistry still further. Among the more annoying specimens are ghouls who spray a lingering acid across a wide area when shot in the head, potentially making chokepoints impassable. You'll also encounter juggernauts that lurk in disguise as clumps of stalagmites. As troublesome as these mid-game threats can be, however, you'll die most often at the hands of *Strafe*'s rank and file – podgy, club-wielding grunts who advance almost noiselessly to clobber you from behind.

Enemy awareness ranges are easy enough to deduce with practice, but there are always a few enemies you can't see – dangling from the ceiling above a health dispenser, tucked around a corner or loitering on the other side of a fake wall. In the first zone, a Stygian labyrinth of corridors and blind corners, this encourages defensive play to the point that *Camp* would seem a more appropriate title than *Strafe*. Over time, though, you learn to cut through the crowd, leaping over skirmishers and flicking through the arsenal with your mousewheel in the finest deathmatch tradition.

**You'll pick a** rifle, shotgun or rail gun as your primary weapon at the outset, which is upgraded in the course of a playthrough with stat buffs and esoteric firing modes – an underslung mine launcher, for example. One of the nastier surprises is that gun mods may be more bother than they're worth, depending on what exactly the procedural generation coughs up. A rifle upgrade that trades range for damage may not avail you much in the third zone, with its longer sightlines and zombie sharpshooters.

There are additional, souped-up weapons to discover in the levels themselves. These are good for just one clip, though you can always smash the drained gun over an adversary's skull before casting it aside. New abilities, meanwhile, are bought at the shops that pop up at preset intervals – the offerings include a flying drone escort, an extra overshield and shotgun heels that inflict splash damage when you jump – though you'll probably want to reserve your credits for teleporter parts in the first instance: once assembled, these allow you to warp to the start of each zone from your shuttle.

*Strafe* styles itself as both "the future of videogames" and "the most action-packed game of 1996", and there's a ring of truth to both gags. In folding together and drilling into layers of FPS convention, Pixel Titans has created a game that is at once sentimental and sharply contemporary. It doesn't so much take us back to '96 as transport '96 into the present, picking up threads left by *Doom* and *Quake* and weaving its own tapestry out of them, every time you play.

**8**



ABOVE The game's snappy tutorial conjures up the sleazier side of '90s action gaming, but there's little trace of that raciness in the game itself. In fairness, even if there were, you wouldn't be able to see it for all the gore










TOP *Strafe* offers two currencies – scrap for armour and ammo refills, and credits to spend at shops on abilities and items. Alternatively, you can kill the shopkeeper.
MAIN The lo-fi visuals disguise the toll the game's headcount and effects may take on your CPU. It's worth maxing out your FOV to lower the risk of being blind-sided.
LEFT *Strafe* doesn't have a story as such, but a winningly bonkers tale is told through scenery elements. The deeper you delve, the more surreal it becomes

# Statik

*Statik*'s greatest trick, among many, is to make the DualShock the star of this darkly comic puzzle game. While Move controllers ape their more capable Vive and Touch cousins, PSVR's unique ability to pop a traditional controller into the world with you thanks to the Dualshock 4's light bar is an underrated aspect of Sony's VR setup.

Not that you'll see a representation of it – or anything resembling your hands, for that matter. Instead, you'll find yourself locked into a series of puzzle boxes that bristle with scientific components. Given no instructions on what to do, you're left to press buttons at random to see which parts of your digital prison activate in response. One button might make an empty slide tray pop out of the top, while another turns a dial that initially seems to have no use. Squeezing a trigger could send a diagonal scan across a vector display; one of the analogue sticks might give you the chance to input numbers or letters into a ticker screen.

It's up to you figure out the relevance of every interaction, and piece together the order in which you must do things to make the box spit out a little printed ticket. Once this is scanned by a robot that always accompanies you during your attempts, you'll be rewarded with a lungful of sleeping gas before waking up in some other lab ready to tackle the next puzzle. There is no through-line or common logic, and every box represents a unique set of challenges. Tilting the DualShock about allows you to squint at the various sides of the device as you search for clues, but there will often be more hints dotted about the sterile labs in which you tackle each test.

You'll also be observed by Dr Ingen, a salty, dispassionate and rather rude scientist. Over time, as your role in the world and his relationship to his employers is slowly revealed, he becomes an even more tragic figure. And while *Statik* shares *Portal*'s atmosphere of cold dislocation and macabre apathy, it quickly asserts its own character, and the finely conceived mechanics and puzzles are all Tarsier's own. Figuring out each intricate box is a joy, and for the most part Tarsier perfectly judges the line between obscurity and logic as you gradually make progress.

While solving each box is an involved process, most players will have seen the end of the game within a couple of hours. *Statik*'s most observant lab rats will find ways to prolong their time in its labs (see Retune), but the fact that the game feels like it comes clattering to halt all too soon is less a criticism of its brevity and more a testament to the game's imaginative, moreish quality.

**9**

**Developer/publisher** Tarsier Studios
**Format** PSVR
**Release** Out now



**RETUNE**
Much is hidden in plain sight in *Statik*'s minimalist environments. Hints as to how to solve many of the puzzles are scattered about if you look closely, sometimes right under your nose. And if you are particularly tuned in to your surroundings, you might even find alternative solutions. Tarsier has also created a handful of multiplayer puzzles, accessed by using the PlayStation app, in which two players must work together to solve bespoke puzzles.

**It's never possible to discern Dr Ingen's features as his face is blurred throughout the game – on the occasions where you have a chance to see yourself, the same is true of your own face, too. It's all a bit threatening**



# Puyo Puyo Tetris

Might this be the most successful cultural exchange of recent times? The first *Puyo* game to reach the west in 13 years, *Puyo Puyo Tetris* brings together one of Russia's finest exports with a puzzler that has largely been the preserve of the import connoisseur. It's a happy marriage, too: though the fusion of two very different puzzle disciplines might at first seem awkward, the broad array of modes and options ensures that casual players and genre aficionados alike will find something to enjoy.

While most of us are reasonably well versed in *Tetris* by now, plenty of players will need bringing up to speed on its Japanese counterpart. It's a deceptively simple game where coloured blobs fall in pairs, and you're tasked with matching four at once. But if you're only matching four, you're doing it wrong; instead, you should be planning several moves ahead, arranging the blobs in step patterns, so a single match prompts a chain reaction when the others fall.

The tutorials aren't ideal, hitting you with a barrage of advanced techniques. But you'll get plenty of practice in an unexpectedly substantial Adventure mode, which covers every game type, pitting you against opponents, score targets and the clock by turns. Its challenges are interspersed with a preposterous cartoon story, but it's told with such cheery enthusiasm you almost have to admire its absurdity. And the hectic pace of the later puzzles means these narrative interruptions serve as welcome breathers from the stress of competitive play against surprisingly tough AI opposition. Yet even when you're up against it, you'll find it's possible to escape from seemingly unwinnable situations: a delay before garbage blocks are deposited in your gully means the dump can be cancelled with a well-timed chain or Tetris. And if your rival has built up a tall stack in anticipation of a lengthy combo or four-line clearance, you can cause them all kinds of trouble with a couple of quick matches in succession.

You'll need to master both games to finish the story, and to compete in the Fusion mode that somehow blends them into a cohesive whole, or the Swap matches that briskly alternate between the two. But if you'd rather focus on one, there's still plenty of choice, from solo arcade modes to offline single- or multi-screen local battles, and ranked matches, on the off-chance you fancy being humiliated by some ridiculously capable Japanese *Puyo* players. With its bright, clean presentation looking resplendent on the small screen, it's a particularly fine fit for Switch's portable mode; for the next few weeks, your daily commute – and occasionally your stop – is likely to fly by.

**8**

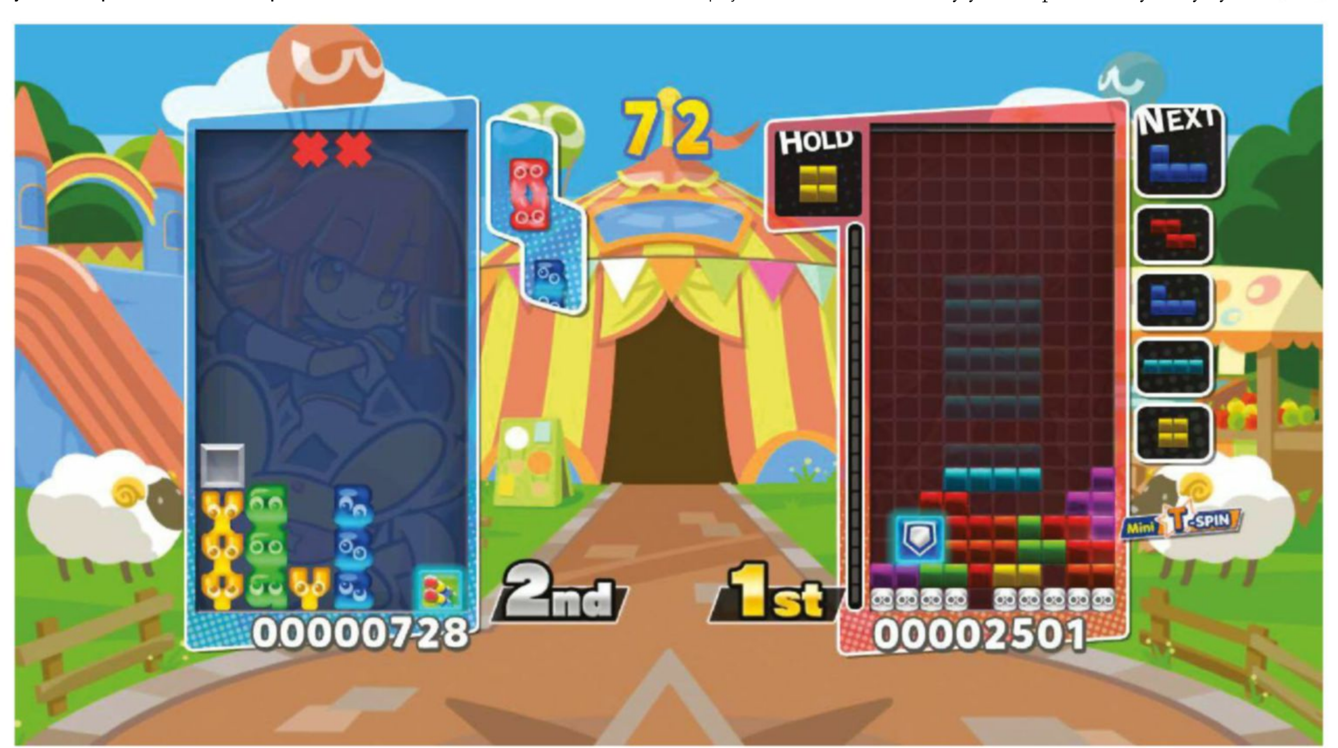
**Credits earned from all modes can be spent on unlockable skins that allow you to customise the look of your blobs and tetrominoes. For a higher fee you can also purchase alternate voice packs for the various characters**

**Developer** Sonic Team
**Publisher** Sega
**Format** PS4, Switch (version tested)
**Release** Out now




**PARTY TIL YOU PUYO**

Among the standard game types are two more dynamic variants. Party gives you infinite lives with which to build a high score, while clearing lines containing item boxes affects your opponent's game. One causes a temporary blackout, limiting their view to within the beam of a sweeping searchlight; another briefly freezes blocks and blobs. Meanwhile, Big Bang places you in perpetual Fever or Lucky Attack mode, depending on your poison. Here, you're charged with clearing preset patterns until time runs out and an explosion shatters the loser's display.



# Guardians Of The Galaxy: Tangled Up In Blue

A close-up shot of a Walkman; a '70s rock standard on the soundtrack; a tableau of the eponymous heroes clambering over one another to grab a shiny MacGuffin. Though it's ostensibly based on the Guardians Of The Galaxy comics, the title screen immediately makes it clear that Telltale's latest will hew closely to the aesthetics and tone of the 2014 movie and its imminent sequel. The choice of song is telling: ELO's Livin' Thing was set to feature in James Gunn's perky comic-book adaptation, but the scene was left on the cutting-room floor. It's an apt pick for a game that often feels as if it's been assembled from alternative takes that weren't quite good enough to make the final edit.

Telltale evokes the source material in superficial ways: the characters and settings just about look the part, though flat art direction and lighting give the whole thing a curiously cut-price feel. For a developer whose work is so steeped in the visual language of cinema, you'd think Telltale would be better at blocking and editing by now, but its action scenes are sloppily constructed, despite one or two inventive flourishes. Conceptually, these set-pieces are fine, but the execution is lacking. Even weaving and shooting your way through an asteroid field fails to raise the pulse.

**Few of your decisions have appreciable payoffs, though a key choice risks antagonising a member of the group. There are strong hints that Star-Lord may face a struggle to keep the gang together as the story progresses**

**Developer/publisher** Telltale Games
**Format** Android, iOS, PC, PS4 (version tested), Xbox One
**Release** Out now



**THE MOTHER-LORD**
One of the film's few missteps is its depiction of the death of Peter Quill's mother: a traumatic loss that is handled in bluntly manipulative fashion. That's not the case here, as Telltale begins to flesh out their relationship – firstly via a flashback sequence and later in a brief vision – to subtly moving effect. The ending suggests this subplot will extend into Episode Two and possibly beyond. So far, it's one of the few convincing reasons to tune in next time.

Though you'll briefly control other members of the group during an extended QTE fight, you'll spend most of your time as Star-Lord, aka Peter Quill. An early investigation introduces two new ideas: Quill can make radio contact with the other Guardians in a similar fashion to *Firewatch*, while the D-pad activates the jets in his heels to hover between floors at defined points. Otherwise it's business as usual, as Telltale again strains to find ways to give the player meaningful involvement. Too often actions are arbitrarily handed to you seemingly because you haven't been given much to do in a while. You'll feel as if you're directing a sleepy actor, or manually cranking a projector to keep the action rolling.

As ever, it's clear the developer is more at home during dialogue exchanges, even if role-playing as a character within a group whose dynamics are well-established means certain responses feel out of place. Still, three cheers for Nolan North, whose take on Rocket Raccoon is comfortably the pick of the performances; he mightn't be doing much different to Bradley Cooper, but North's natural comic timing elevates the material. But despite his efforts, a couple of big laughs (the world's slowest lift; Drax's sincere literalism) and at least one genuine surprise, you're left with a gnawing sensation that Telltale's formula is becoming as creaky as its engine. And that's a feeling on which you're unlikely to get hooked.

**5**




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TIME EXTEND

# Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Siege

## How Ubisoft transformed an underwhelming game into one of the generation's best shooters

**By Ben Maxwell**

**Developer/publisher** Ubisoft (Montreal) **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2015

The silence is interrupted by a burst of gunfire, followed by some choice expletives over voice chat. It turns out the sniper we sent our last remaining teammate to get rid of wasn't alone. The game ominously announces: "Down to one friendly."

In the brief skirmishes that led up to this moment three more of our allies, along with two of our five opponents, were killed. Now, dangling from a line attached to the side of a building, we're a sitting duck for the player who just gunned down our friend. Worse than that, we also have the added pressure of knowing that all four of our erstwhile teammates are now watching our screen from the afterlife. Panicked, we climb back up to the roof and whip around, the whole time expecting to be peppered with bullets. Somehow, we get a bead on the window before the enemy player sees us, and take him out with two well-aimed shots the second his head comes into view.

But two enemies are still at large and we only have 1:06 left on the clock. To win, we must either hold the room – without opposition – for ten seconds, or kill both of the enemy players. To make matters worse, we're in overtime and this is a match-point round, since our opponents are up four rounds to three. If we're killed or run out of time, the match will be lost.

We rappel back down the side of the building and smash out the base of a barricaded window with the butt of our gun. The sound draws a player into the room and we cut them down. One left now. We swing into the room and check the corners. There are ten seconds remaining on the clock as we dash into the stairwell and leap over the handrail. The pulsing endgame soundtrack rises in volume as we make it into the objective room and crouch, holding position at the door, with just two seconds remaining. Suddenly, our opponent rushes out of the small room to our left. We land a couple of shots in his leg as he disappears around the corner, then move forward to re-engage, staying crouched. This time he returns fire; his bullets shatter our rifle shield but leave us unscathed as we duck right, loosing off a couple more shots. The second projectile finds its target, and with that the round is over. Against all the odds, we've won – the round, at least. The map reloads, and we go again.

**To say that** *Rainbow Six Siege* is a tense experience would be an understatement. The drama that pervades every round of Ubisoft's tactical team shooter is a heady – and stifling, at times – accompaniment to each asynchronous, five-on-five face-off. But it's also one of the most rewarding team shooters you can play. For a start, it really *is* about teamwork for once: players who favour lone-wolf tactics might thrive if they're particularly handy with a rifle, but the ever-changing situations that each round will present necessitate a mix of good communication, patience and smart tactical thinking. To emerge victorious from a ranked match through a combination of careful planning and quick thinking is a singular rush; to carry your team to victory from a clutch situation is more potent still.

But while being on the attacking side is stressful, as you slowly move towards your target while watching for ambushes and traps, defending an objective is even more nerve-shredding. There's a burst of activity at the outset, as your team rushes to fortify the room, place traps and gadgets, then take up a defensible position (not easy in *Siege*'s destructible environments). The bustle is followed by deafening silence as you wait for the first signs of approach – normally a distant and muffled blast will alert you that your opponents have entered the building, and are now working to surround you.

Today, *Siege* is a remarkable game, but it wasn't quite so assured when it launched in 2015. Back then, defending players were placed at a disadvantage by a less effective toolset. A particularly egregious example was defensive operator Kapkan's entry-denial trap, which gave itself away with a huge red spike protruding from whichever window or door it was set on – if players somehow missed this first clue, the device's bright-red laser trigger would alert anyone who broke down the barricaded entry point. It was a matter of balance, of course, but Ubisoft Montreal went a little too far to ensure everyone stood a fair chance .

There were much less in the way of counter-offensive options, too, and this ▶

often meant your only sensible option as a defender was to hole up in the objective room and wait for the enemy to come to you, hoping a grenade tossed into the room wouldn't send you to the afterlife as a spectator. The game's staying power was further threatened by a paucity of modes and maps, along with some woolly hit detection, and the need to unlock operators by spending in-game currency (known as Renown) felt unsporting given *Siege*'s premium price point.

But things soon changed. While the launch product may have disappointed, Ubisoft Montreal was thinking long-term from the off; the studio embarked on an aggressive campaign of regular updates and tweaks, building *Siege*'s gradual evolution around a year-long plan (and associated season pass) that saw two new operators and a fresh map added to the line-up every few months, and more regular updates in between. Weapons were rebalanced in response to community feedback, as well as to accommodate new additions to the line-up, and the odds were gradually evened for defenders. Among a multitude of improvements and changes, Kapkan's trap lost its give-away spike, turned down the brightness of its laser trigger beam, and could now even be mounted at different heights on any given doorway or window.

With each new map and added operator, the developer has pushed the potential of its destruction tech further, too. Where some earlier maps have spots that are relatively easy to defend or attack, more recent additions have made each role increasingly difficult as the number of unbreakable walls in new locations dwindle. This, along with the playerbase's growing experience, has seen operators adopt meta strategies such as roaming (where defending operators leave the objective room to ambush attackers, or even turn the space into a trap) and eschew barricades in favour of blasting gaps in the flimsy masonry (known as kill holes) to catch approaching enemies off guard. It's a risky strategy – players taking up position behind a non-reinforced wall are just as vulnerable to returned fire, for instance – but one that highlights the remarkable strategic flexibility of *Siege*'s environments.

The defensive team's frantic preparation phase provides some of the game's most fraught moments as you try to second-guess the attacking team's tactics and minimise their options

**CRUCIALLY, UBISOFT HAS RESISTED THE TEMPTATION TO PARCEL UP ALL OF THESE UPDATES AS PREMIUM DLC**

Crucially, Ubisoft has resisted the temptation to parcel up all of these updates as premium DLC, despite *Siege*'s rapid rate of growth and improvement. Sure, players without a season pass still have to earn enough Renown to add new operators to their roster, and will also have to wait an extra week to access new maps. Yet the player community hasn't been fragmented in the way that, say, *Battlefield 4*'s was after a few expansions. As a result of this approach to post-launch support, *Siege*'s online community – which now has over 15 million players – continues to swell today.

*Siege*'s success has caused a shake-up at Ubisoft, too. The studio, which has long

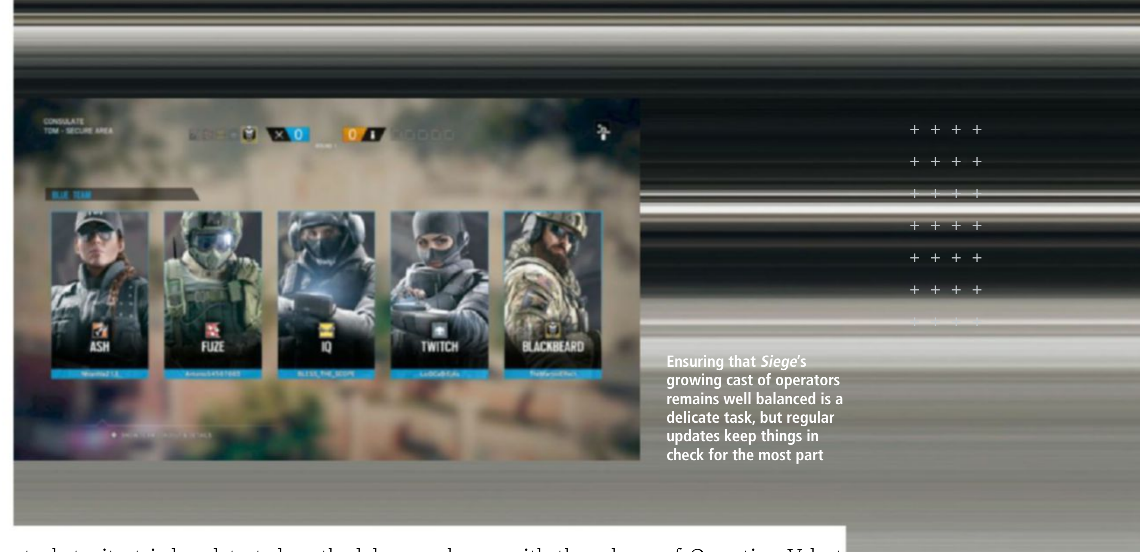


Attackers can use the CCTV system after death to help spot enemy players. Defenders can shoot down cameras, however



## HEATED ARGUMENT

While Ubisoft Montreal has built *Siege* into an essential team shooter, the studio's commitment to its evolution can sometimes cause problems. The most recent mid-season reinforcements patch – the latest in a series of regular updates that, among other things, buff or debuff operators – has caused no small amount of controversy. Perhaps the biggest cause of grievance is that Glaz, an operator armed with a sniper rifle who can be game-changing in the hands of an experienced player, now has a thermal scope. It means smoke and gas no longer cause him problems, and even a sliver of exposed limb can be easily targeted. But while it may feel unbalanced, playing the game since launch has taught us that blips like this often level out when re-contextualised by new operators.




Ensuring that *Siege*'s growing cast of operators remains well balanced is a delicate task, but regular updates keep things in check for the most part

stuck to its tried-and-tested methodology of putting out regular instalments of sprawling, and increasingly homogenised, open-world games, has admitted to having learned much from the *Siege* experience. The publisher has at last realised the potential in creating games that can be supported – and played – for years, rather than weeks, after launch. More updates, more content, and more flexibility can only benefit a studio that has become so reliant on blockbusters. We've already seen a partial shift in DLC strategy for *The Division*, and it seems *For Honor* will follow suit. Quite how that might apply to *Assassin's Creed* or *Far Cry* is another matter, but for a behemoth like Ubisoft that appears so set in its ways, it's far from an insignificant gesture.

**This new-found** spirit of innovation is upheld by *Siege*'s second season, which began with the release of Operation Velvet Shell. The update introduces a new map called Coastline, set in a party mansion, and two new operators: Mira and Jackal. What makes this first instalment so special, however, is that both operators have been designed to disrupt the established meta. Jackal, an attacker, can detect recent footprints (presented as heatmaps, to show how recent they are) and make roaming players' lives a nightmare – though stealth operator Caviera still won't leave tracks when using her Silent Step ability. Mira, meanwhile, can insert a bulletproof one-way mirror into any destructible wall, encouraging players to stay in the objective room while also making things harder for approaching attackers used to certain routes. What's more, she can detonate a charge that shatters the glass after a short timer, creating an impromptu kill hole.

These are profound changes even for a game that has seen so much reshaping since launch. They're indicative of a developer that is reacting to player behaviour in a mischievously creative way, and reflect a publisher that understands the benefits of letting it happen. Ubisoft will continue to shake up the meta in its second year of support for a game which, in its first 12 months, has gone from a flawed proof of concept to one of the finest online shooters available today. Its cerebral pacing and steep learning curve mean that it won't appeal to everyone – but how often do you get to say that about a Ubisoft game these days? ■

Quick thinking and fast reflexes are essential, but you'll also need patience








JAMES LEACH

# Postcards From The Clipping Plane

Conveniently ignoring the serious side of videogame development

After a lot of diverse and hugely enjoyable game-making, I've just been given the chance to work on a new roleplaying game. And I have to say it's like going home. I've spent more time working on this genre than any other, and I love them. And in their sword-clattering, chest-opening, chicken-eating, shop-keeper-chatting ways, they've been good to me.

Making an RPG is a complex endeavour, though. I was briefly minded to compare it with playing one, but as an idea, that's going to flounder before we even reach the mountains we're inevitably going to cross. So let's not. Instead, we should have a look at why I think they're still king of the gaming pile, and what can still go wrong with them.

Firstly, a good RPG is the ultimate vehicle for storytelling – nothing captures the imagination like a world, familiar enough to understand quickly, but rich and deep enough for players to lose themselves in. The classic setting you're thinking of is, of course, some medieval-type Lord Of The Rings world, but consider *Fallout 4* or even *GTA V* in story mode. You can't argue those aren't rich, deep worlds, and they're definitely RPGs. The characters, complete with stats, grow and change as they make progress, there's a lot of freedom to pursue the elements you enjoy, and there are quests, including an overall aim. And when you're in those worlds, you're truly in them. There is, of course, a lot of combat, and weaponry with which to carry it out. But RPGs don't need citadels and princesses. In fact, I'm of the opinion that those worlds are done to death. And don't even mention collecting crystals, runes or chapters of some world-changing book.

To make the story, any story, work, the characters need to be exceptional. If we're the strong, silent protagonist, everyone else has to be more than an information-delivery system in humanoid form. It's tricky, though. We've got to keep our cutscenes and interactions short; they are, after all, interruptions in the action for the majority of players, no matter how necessary. Humour works, though, and I hope always will. Great voice acting also helps, but there's no substitute for tight writing.



Also it's a no to animals you can bond with, because Fable II pretty much covered that

For a long time we've been wise to the pitfalls of the damsel in distress, but let's also steer away from the strong, no-nonsense female characters who replaced them. And let's really tiptoe away from the will-they, won't-they love stories, no matter how tempting it is if the artists have over-clicked the gorgeous and pneumatic tools when designing them. If players are going to fall in love with an NPC of any gender, it's not going to be because we want them to.

Staying with characters, let's swell the 'no' pile with children. If they're not ciphers representing innocence, they're supremely powerful supernatural objects with wayward capriciousness. And because hitting them with axes isn't allowed, let's not have them at all. Also it's a no to animals you can bond with, because *Fable II* pretty much covered that.

This is all a bit negative, so what *can* we have? Shops are fine. They always seem to sit outside the game or story and that's OK. If there are credits, shillings or gold pieces to collect, make it easy and simple and we can get straight back to the questing. Shopkeepers shouldn't be holders of story-based info, though, especially if there's more than one, or our noble journey is at risk of turning into a tedious Saturday morning high-street schlep. Unfeasibly massive inventories are fine, too. If I can carry ten weapons, I can carry a hundred. And it mustn't slow me down, thank you.

So, travel. To be epic, the world usually has to be physically large. As in real life, there's something satisfying about travelling to mountains, across deserts or entering new towns, but if it takes ages to get around, my meandering fun is prised from my cold, dead feet and I'm just going to go where I'm told. It's a tricky one, this, so as a writer I'm happy to bail and let smarter developers than me sort it. Just don't ask me to walk everywhere.

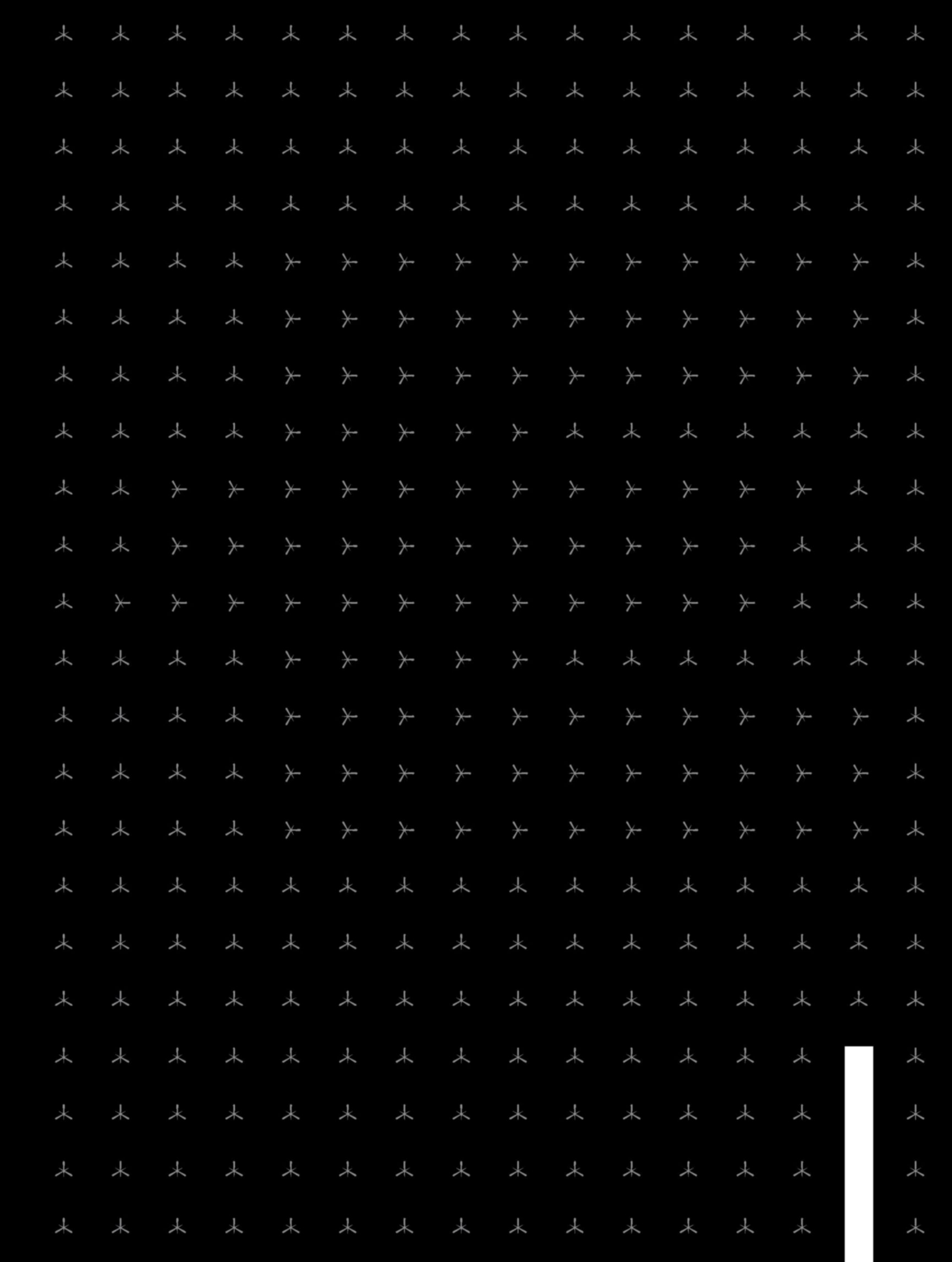
Finally, what's it all for? Sure, we can be out to save a kingdom, rid the world of evil or defeat the hordes of undead eyeing our lovely green homeland. A big game deserves a big story with big consequences for success or failure. It doesn't have to be like that, though. On our journey we are, without doubt, going to be double-crossed, to see a character die unexpectedly and to have something we've come to rely on taken from us. I'm happy if the tale is clear and experiencing it is fun.

Oh, and let's have dragons. There isn't an RPG, no matter where it's set, that wouldn't benefit from having a dragon. That can talk.

*James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer whose work features in games and on television and radio*

Illustration **Box Kite Curve**


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